

Pompton Plains culinary student wins prestigious scholarship BY LORRAINE ASH

Friday nights at the Galiano household in Pompton Plains are pizza nights. But not takeout pizza. No, sirree.

This family makes its own. Always has. They say using a lot of flour and making a big mess is a necessary part of the experience.

It's no wonder that such a kitchen — with baskets of bread and garden tomatoes on the counters — would produce a chef. Namely, 20-year-old Alissa Galiano, a junior at The College of Culinary Arts at Johnson & Wales University in [Rhode Island](#), where she is pursuing a bachelor's degree in culinary nutrition with a sommelier concentration.

"My dad is the one who cooks," she said, referring to Michael Galiano, a carpenter who traces his roots to Cosenza in the region of Calabria, Italy. "My mom would come home late from work, and he would get off at 3, pick up me and my brother from school and just start cooking. He'd have tomato sauce on the stove all day."

Her dad learned to cook from his mom, who, until she passed away last year, lived across the street. Alissa remembers the dough her grandma would fry up during the holidays, then coat with powdered sugar. It wasn't Christmas without that Italian dessert.

"Food is such an important part of this family," she said. "Cooking together has helped us stay close-knit and keep our culture pretty nicely."

Which is why the affable Galiano was particularly ecstatic to be chosen as one of seven culinary students nationwide to win the 2009 Giacomo Bologna Scholarship. The group recently returned from a weeklong trip to Tuscany, awarded by Gruppo Ristoratori Italiani and the National Restaurant Association Educational Foundation.

The group — one student translated for the rest — landed in Pisa and were driven to their hotel in Montalcino, where they tasted wine at the famed 1,100-year-old CastelGiocondo Estate, one of nine owned by the Frescobaldi family, winemakers in Italy for 700 years and the students' host in Italy. Montalcino was the first stop in a trip that would take the American contingent to taste wines in the seacoast town of Bolgheri, to eat at La Taverna di San Giuseppe — a Michelin-star restaurant in Siena and to study cheesemaking at Pecorino di Pienza.

"We saw how the cheese is made and tried so many different cheeses and dried hams," Galiano said. "The bread there doesn't have salt so it's mild and good for pairing with anything because the flavor doesn't interfere."

Add to the experience the rolling endless hills of wine country and the stone streets of Florence, where there is history and mystery in every step, and Galiano was in her glory.

She tasted multifarious varieties of Chianti, a red wine from Tuscany, as well as many other wines. She tried her hand at rolling picci, a thick spaghetti. She learned about vitello tonnato, a dish featuring veal pounded thin and cooked with a puree of tuna. And, joy of joys, she savored the flavor of Tuscan crostini with chicken liver pate.

All of that is great knowledge to share back home, where this summer Galiano is working at Grato in Morris Plains as well as the saute line at the adjacent Tabor Road Tavern. She helps make the hot appetizers: fries, baby rack ribs, mushrooms, spinach, haricot vert, mac 'n' cheese and more.

Perhaps an even larger pleasure is sharing what she's learned with Dad, her first

culinary teacher and the man who transmitted the fundamental love for fresh food shared as a family.

While passion and joy are necessary ingredients for any chef, Galiano possesses another essential quality for success, according to chef Zachary Hedden, a culinary experiential education specialist at Johnson & Wales who works with her.

"Before Alissa makes a decision, she weighs it," Hedden said. "To her this trip has not been a fun vacation. It has been a way to further her knowledge of Italian cuisine and culture. Alissa is very motivated, very focused and very careful in considering all career moves.

"I don't see many students who so consciously consider their actions at such a young age."

This summer she has a short-term goal: to start speaking Italian. Lessons began last week.

Ultimately, she has a long-term goal: to work at spas or in a test kitchen.

Between the two and after graduation, she would like to live for a time in Italy, where takeout places are virtually nonexistent, there are barely any obese people, and most everyone walks since gas costs \$8 a gallon and the ancient streets are so charming (and sometimes difficult to negotiate in a [car](#)).

America, she believes, is a study in contrast. So many people have lost the food traditions of their original cultures, she said. Or, they live such fast-paced existences that they have no time to cook or they just plain don't know how.

If she can bring back here even some of the tastes and feeling of the Italian countryside, lush with sun and Cypress and olive trees, she figures she will have done something significant.

Considered and focused though she may be, Galiano still has an Italian heart. So she rubbed the nose of the famous bronze statue of a life-size wild boar in the Piazza della Signoria in Florence. That means she'll return.

"Hopefully soon," she said.

In the meantime, there's pizza to make and courses to take and memories enough to dream on.

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