



## C CRAFTING AN UNCOMMON CUISINE

AT MAX'S ES-CA, MAX CALICCHIO AND ALISON MARCHESE ARE SERVING SOMETHING RARE TO STATEN ISLAND: A CONTINENTAL ITALIAN MENU WITH LOTS OF TWISTS AND TURNS

BY JESSICA JONES-GORMAN • PHOTOS BY VINNIE AMESSE



With its inset fireplace, billowing drapes, and ornate ceilings, the dining room at Max's Es-Ca is inviting, chic, and surprisingly spacious. And for Max Calicchio, it's just like home.

"We wanted the dining room to have a nice warm feel, so we totally changed the décor...even had a designer come in and paint," the owner and chef at the Dongan Hills hotspot noted. "From the tiles to the

ceiling, we completely transformed and renovated the entire place."

Situated on a busy strip of Richmond Road and flanked by office buildings and other retail space, the posh neighborhood eatery has been located in the same spot since its opening in 2002. But when Calicchio acquired full ownership in 2011, he and business manager Alison Marchese revamped the menu and décor

and put Calicchio's name on the door.

"I opened Es-Ca originally in 2002 with my former partner," Calicchio explained. "But I sold my interest in 2010 only to return and take over in 2011." And for him, after getting his start in the business bussing tables at the age of 13, owning his own restaurant was definitely a big deal.

"I started in this industry as a bus boy and then a waiter and bartender," he



recalled. "I then managed a place before opening a restaurant on Greenwich Street in Manhattan, but we were in the shadow of the World Trade Center, and four months after we opened, the towers collapsed. So we closed our doors and I basically gave up on the idea of owning my own place."

The original Es-Ca was to be a blend of Calicchio's culinary and managerial skills, and it was, for almost eight years. In 2005, he even signed up for some courses at the Institute of Culinary Education, a refresher of sorts that eventually turned into a full course of training in culinary arts. After his graduation and an externship at Butter on Lafayette Street (under the tutelage of Alex Guarnaschelli), Calicchio focused all of his energy on perfecting his own dishes.

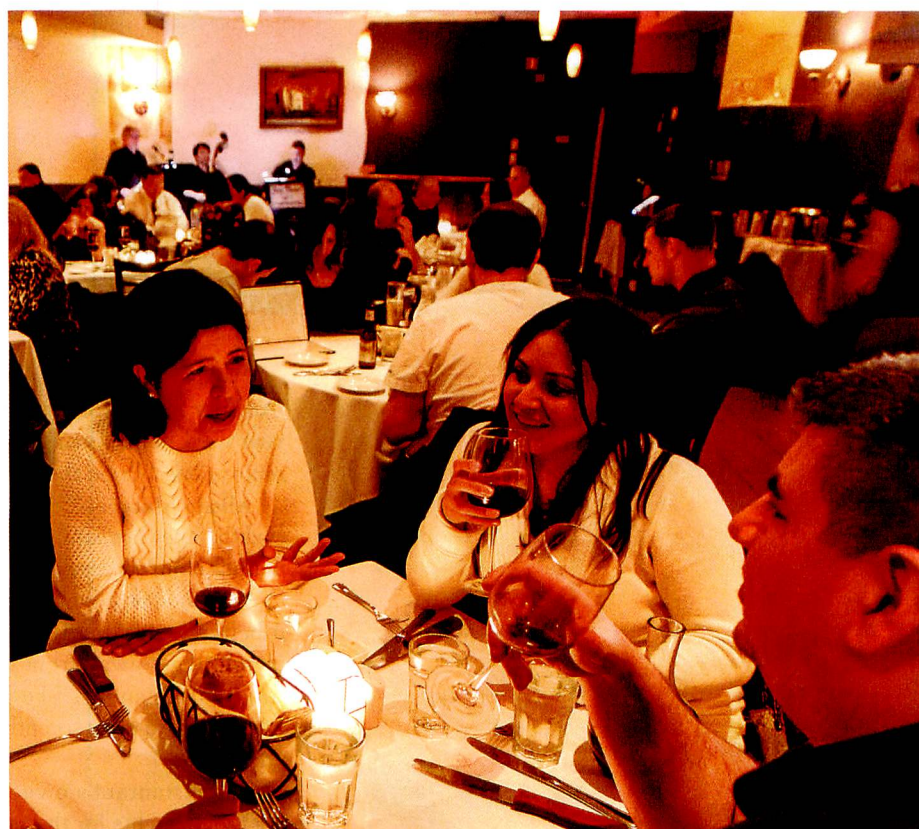
He left Es-Ca in 2010 to pursue another venture, but when an opportunity to obtain full ownership presented itself a year later, he returned to his roots.

"When I decided to come back I wanted to really fulfill my vision," Calicchio said. "I wanted to put my stamp on this restaurant, and having my name on door added a little pressure, certainly. If something wasn't absolutely perfect, I had to own up to it."

So, the new owner focused on top-notch service and altered the menu to cater to an evolving dinner crowd.

"The menu originally consisted of a lot of salads, pizzas, and other, lighter items," recalled Calicchio. "Of course we kept a lot of the sandwiches, pizza, and salads for our lunch menu, but we also added new dinner options, such as Beef Wellington and Tuna TarTar [served spicy with avocado, red onions and diced tomatoes]."

Calicchio kept Es-Ca's popular island-renowned weekly specials, too, offering two-for-one entrees every Wednesday from a special menu. There's also a jazz band every Friday night and a DJ on Saturdays. He is currently in the process of designing a new menu for each season and has added a wine special on Mondays, offering the entire wine list at a 40 percent discount.





## RESTAURANT REVIEW



“For people who appreciate wine, it’s a big deal,” he said, smiling. “We cover the four major regions with our wine list: Spain, France, Italy, and the United States, and the list ranges in price from \$20-something to \$140. On Monday, a bottle that retails for \$120 can be purchased for \$75.”

The menu includes an array of appetizers including a Vegetable Napoleon (layered zucchini, yellow squash, Portobello mushroom and asparagus topped with fresh mozzarella and drizzled with extra virgin olive oil and balsamic reduction) and a Filet Mignon Bruschetta (served with sautéed wild mushrooms, baby arugula and diced tomatoes, and finished with a horseradish sauce).

Entrees range from Stuffed Shrimp and Blackened Tuna to Grilled Skirt Steak and Panko Breaded Pork Chops.



“We have plans to offer a new menu seasonally,” Calicchio added. “And our renovations are about 95 percent complete. In the coming year we’d like to change our furniture around and do some more renovations around the bar, though.”

Alison Marchese, who has worked with Calicchio since 2002, said that they are continually brainstorming on how to make the restaurant more successful.

“We look at a bowl of pasta and try to think of ways to make it better,” said Marchese. “We’re constantly changing the menu, trying to get away from typical restaurant food. In addition to traditional standbys like fried calamari and mozzarella en carozza, we try to offer something offbeat like filet mignon bruschetta and tartar.”

The restaurant’s owners are also in the process of formulating theme nights for the restaurant, including “Lobster Tuesdays,”





which will feature inventive dishes including—you guessed it—as the main ingredient.

“We’ll offer lobster pot pie...lobster mac and cheese,” Marchese said. “We want to make the restaurant a destination even in the middle of the week, and that brand of improvisation is one of the key methods of achieving a real feat for this kind of business...all-week dining.”

It’s just part of how Calicchio and Marchese hope to bring a little more fusion to their establishment.

“We really want to bring something very unique to the people of Staten Island,” Marchese concluded. ●



**Max’s Es-Ca**

1559 Richmond Rd.  
S.I., NY 10304  
718.980.5006  
maxsesca.com

**Cuisine:** Continental Italian/Seafood

**Hours:** Monday, Tuesday 11 A.M. - 10 P.M.  
Wednesday, Thursday 11 A.M. - 11 P.M.  
Friday, Saturday 11 A.M. - 12 A.M.  
Sunday 12 P.M. - 9 P.M.

**Price:** Appetizers \$10 - \$15  
Entrees \$20 - \$32

All major credit cards accepted

**Service:** Friendly, professional

**Bar:** Full bar with a focus on a range of wines from Spain, France, Italy, and the United States

**Parking:** Parking lot, valet

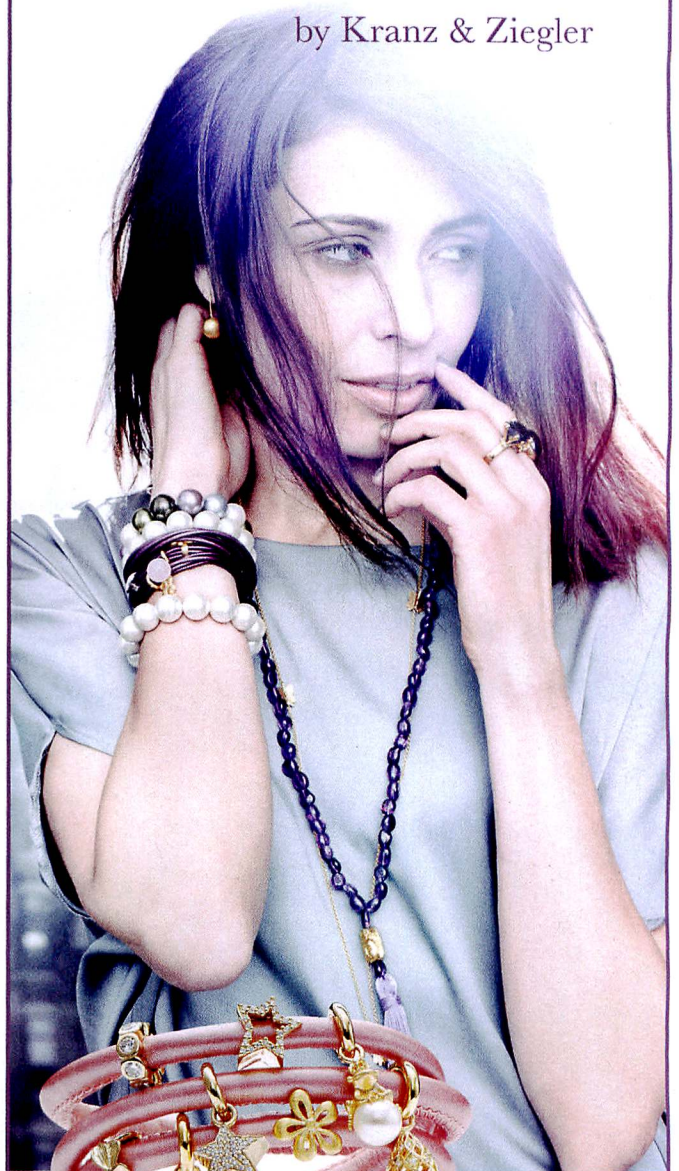
**Private Parties:** Yes

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