

Upfront

Long ago, I learned it's not worth the hard feelings to do restaurant reviews. This is not one. Rather, it's a salute to a good friend who, through consistent, hard work; unrestrained optimism; reliable instincts; and wide-eyed curiosity has built a local mini-empire. An immigrant success story. A testimony to entrepreneurial spirit – a spirit that is uniquely embraced and rewarded by the best of the American ethos.

Anthony and Rebecca (Bec) Debrecey are Aussie transplants. Before his current life as a restaurateur, Anthony worked in freight and shipping. He had no experience as a chef, server, or in the food and beverage business of any kind. He did a stretch as an ex-pat in Japan. Eventually, the couple made their way to Savannah. I didn't interview either Anthony or Bec for this feature. They don't know I'm writing it. So, the story is assembled from my mostly reliable memories of conversations we've had over the years.

I first noticed Anthony as the knee-length-shorts-wearing guy stalking a construction site near my home. Something was happening to transform the ground-level space on the northwest corner of Bull and Oglethorpe, but nobody seemed to know what it was. Whatever, it felt like it was taking a long time. The building is owned by a lovely neighbor down my street, but I didn't dare ask her for details. Instead, I passed by the ongoing project often, regularly spying Anthony, although I had no idea of his name. His distinctive accent had not yet caught my ear.

Eventually, somebody said something about a Thai restaurant. Which would make sense in retrospect, given Anthony's exposure to Asian cultures. But a funny thing happened on the way to Bangkok: Eventually, the light-filled space with the preserved exposed brick, hardwood floors, an urban-chic vibe, and the Ferrari of espresso machines started serving breakfast and its colorful leather seats began to fill. This strategic pivot (if there was one) makes sense. Evidently, Australia boasts a vibrant coffee culture, famous for its high standards, community connection, and iconic "flat white." Perhaps, Anthony missed tastes of home, so he set out to bring elements of

an Aussie morning to his adopted hometown. It worked. Collins Quarter was a local hit, a go-to spot for elevated breakfast and coffee with a killer burger for lunch. After a while, the Internet caught on, and a nationwide competition for weekend brunch tables grew fierce.

Anthony and Bec are not the type of people to sit contentedly and tally the receipts of their success. They are creators, restless to do the next thing that feels worth doing. Consequently, Southern Cross Hospitality operates Collins Quarter on Bull Street (the OG); Collins Quarter at Forsyth, in a previously underutilized building that nobody seemed to be able to figure out what to do with; The Fitzroy, a decked-out gastropub; The Deck Beach Bar and Kitchen, an endeavor on Tybee that changed the scale of Anthony's daily odometer accruals; Ukiyo Izakawa and Ramen Bar, a place for excellent and authentic Japanese dishes; Fishbar, a live-fire rustic-hip seafood-focused eatery; Doki-doki, the most compelling and ambitious and yummy gelato and ice cream you'll find anywhere; and – now – La Vetta, a place that is hard to describe in a few-worded phrase.

Aside from my affection for and gratitude to the Debreceys, it's because of La Vetta that I'm writing this column. I want you to try it. And I want to you to know what to expect when you do.

La Vetta is Italian at its core. Executive chef Michele Minichillo is a native of Italy. He and his wife, Sara, moved to Savannah to join this project with Anthony and Bec. Michele is enormously talented. Fiery and passionate about his work, he is doing things that few other kitchens in the area have attempted. His plates are works of art. His pre-service prep is meticulous and demanding. His back-of-the-house team is studying with a master, in real-time. His pace seems exhausting to the interested observer...and the interested observer has a direct window into a Michelin-level world, as the immaculate kitchen – the one on the main floor, not its twin below deck – is wide open to the dining public.

One might be tempted to say La Vetta is a special-occasion place, because of the complementary amuse bouche; the nightly shaken starter cocktails that arrive at your table unprompted; the tightly wound, warm, wet, herb-scented hand towel that I humiliatingly stuck in my mouth before I realized it wasn't edible; and the beautifully dressed, aspirational, mannered service team who make you

want to root for them with your whole heart. But, despite Southern Cross's popularity among visitors to our city, it's a local company with a familiar friend's soul. So, each of my visits will be special, but they won't be limited to infrequent celebrations. A place like La Vetta isn't cheap to operate, and it took four years to complete from the early demolition days.

La Vetta is on Broughton Street, which can be a tricky place for fine dining. Il Pasticcio, an upscale Italian where Levy's Jewelers is today, had a nice run, until it ended. They tried a high-end steakhouse upstairs – I can't remember the name...a late, great friend of mine with New York (and global) steakhouse success was involved and it failed anyway; Gottlieb's turned out fancy Southern-influenced food but fell on financial hard times and unceremoniously closed its corner doors; Dottie's never figured out what it wanted to be and its operating team sheepishly skipped town after serving Kamala some cake for the press pool cameras while hoping the photos didn't capture the mountain of red ink. But past doesn't have to be prologue, and 45 Bistro's long-term success proves it's possible to compete on the street.

This is Anthony...

Me (and Jenna): We're thinking about having a small wedding reception (in a few weeks). Do you do that kind of thing at Collins in the Park?

Him: Sure, mate. Don't worry about it. We'll figure it out. What day do you want?

I have witnessed Anthony offering his place as refuge for mourners in times of their most profound grief. No charge. The D's have hosted countless fundraisers and contributed generously themselves to causes spanning education, community improvement, and the arts. These are good people. He is fundamentally shy and averse to publicity. I write this without his consent but in hope that he understands it's the best way I have to express my thanks and admiration.

Like I said: Try La Vetta. And when the incredibly beautiful lounge below it – V – opens, try it, too. Witness what Michele is up to at the stove. It's special. The Debreceys have earned our support.

Scott A. Lawrence

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