

# Jason Betska *Al Dente's Ristorante Italiano*

When you grow up on the Jersey Shore like Chef Jason Betska, one memory can't be disputed – some foods are as memorable as the boardwalk itself! It's a rite of passage to eat crispy fries, saltwater taffy, Italian ice in a paper cup, bright red candy apples on a stick, hot dogs smothered in mustard and authentic Italian pizza! Just like the 'Boss' drew inspiration from sounds, sights and happy people in iconic beach surroundings for his illustrious music, 'Jay' brings his Jersey shore spunky passion for cooking to his culinary career today. Imagine this young 'beach boy' at 13 earning \$3.25 / hour working on the boardwalk checking people in at beach gates with their resident passes. Or setting up giant umbrellas near the arcade with summer smells of griddled burgers – more intoxicating than any food of your lifetime! By 16, Jay landed his first job being paid to cook – at Lucky Leo's and Frankie's Bar & Grille in Point Pleasant, NJ!

"I loved the rush. I was making sausage parmigiana sandwiches, cheesesteaks and learning the art of making pizza". Jay grew up with aspirations to become an orthopedic surgeon. College in NYC and living the good life was the chapter revealing how much he loved the restaurant world. His passion was cooking. Period! Looking back, he recalls reading 'Frugal Gourmet' whenever he misbehaved as a child. Who could imagine the impact on his current profession!

As many chefs share a dream of owning their own restaurant, Jay didn't stray far from this ambition. For years he was chased for restaurant, club and foodservice management positions. Leading the big picture of food enterprises wasn't exactly what rocked his world. Jay is a food chemist, thriving on total freedom to run a kitchen; this is why he does what he does. "The best part of my day is creating daily specials, managing my 100% scratch restaurant, working 12-hour days and loving my work alongside the team". Settling happily into his world as Executive Chef role at Al Dente's Ristorante Italiano in St. Johns, Jay loves not having to cut corners. He has an open mind to the cooks who bring clever suggestions of a dish to the menu, too.

The excitement of preparing Shrimp Sambuca or Filet Mignon Au Poivre (a dreamboat of luxury with a peppercorn brandy cream sauce), from fork-tender prime Veal Parmigiana to almost anything from his kitchen dressed in lemon garlic butter, Chef serves up modern odes to classic Italian favorites. With a well-planned fresh, simple to understand menu served in an open dining room that feels like 'mama' invited you to Sunday dinner, it's a favorite for guests who enjoy old world comfort food with a variation on each dish.

At Al Dente, there's a feeling that everyone knows each other at the bar where high-top dining is popular. Although this happy kitchen is turning out many specials inspired by Jay's early beach life, the game changer might be coming this summer if he brings frozen custard to Al Dente. Let's remind him that Pt. Pleasant, NJ food culture will cool off any hot summer day in northeast Florida – bite-by-every-creamy-bite! We know that summertime is synonymous with seashore and custard cones to this Jersey guy!

*Leigh Cort*



*Chef Jason's Seafood Risotto – a medley of mussels, lobster meat, scallops, shrimp, spinach, roasted red peppers and black olives served in a creamy feta cheese sauce.*