

Rockland's Culinary Maverick

With dishes like his Fabulous Bowl of Meat, chef Kerry Altiero keeps Cafe Miranda on the front burner

BY SUSAN AXELROD // PHOTOGRAPHY BY KARI HERER



When Kerry Altiero opened Cafe Miranda in Rockland in 1993, the midcoast city was still a gritty fishing community. The former Methodist church that's a stone's throw from the restaurant had not yet been transformed into the Farnsworth Art Museum's Wyeth Center. Altiero's good friend, chef Melissa Kelly, wouldn't open Primo for another six years. Self-taught, with a quirky sense of

humor and a fondness for leather jackets and European motorcycles, Altiero has built his reputation on being an iconoclast while, at the same time, becoming one of Maine's most respected and beloved restaurateurs. A participant in the Hannaford Chef's Table program, which helps home cooks make healthy meals and in turn raises funds for child nutrition, Altiero was recently named Chef of the Year by Hospitality Maine. His 2014 cookbook, *Adven-*

tures in Comfort Food (cowritten by Maine magazine copyeditor Katherine Gaudet) was reissued last fall as *The Best Comfort Food on the Planet*. Among the recipes is one of his many signature dishes, the Fabulous Bowl of Meat, known as the FBOM.

Q. What was your inspiration for the Fabulous Bowl of Meat?

A. In the mid-1980s, my ex-wife (and former partner in Cafe Miranda) Evelyn Donnelly and I were catering out of a basement kitchen in Cape May, New Jersey. I had a big bowl of ground pork spiced with green curry paste, and I had a sink full of just-washed romaine lettuce and cilantro. It was really late, and I was hungry. I grabbed a lettuce leaf, piled some of the pork onto it, added the cilantro and green onions and squeezed a lime over it. It was a bizarre kind of Thai street taco thing, and I said, "That is one fabulous bowl of meat."

Q. How did the FBOM end up on the menu at Cafe Miranda?

A. When I moved to Maine in 1988, I worked at the East Wind Inn in Tenants Harbor, and I got to create my own menu; the FBOM was on it and so was seared halibut with scallions, pickled ginger, wasabi, and soy, and lamb chops with tahini demiglace and bulgur—nobody was doing that kind of stuff. After four years the owner, Tim Watts, told me I had to go open my own place. He wasn't firing me. He said, "What you want to do is so different from what anyone else is doing; you have to go do it and succeed or fail, but get it out of your system." So I opened Miranda. And now we make the FBOM with ground chicken that we grind ourselves and more fish sauce than you might think is wise. We added rice noodles to it to give it some more texture. It's a staple. And it's great for the staff because the diner builds the dish; they don't have to do it.

Q. Why does Cafe Miranda have such a huge menu? Has it always been that way?

A. Does it look like I can make up my mind? When we first opened, I did a printed menu because I thought I was supposed to—six or seven pages of very small type. Then the specials list got to be three pages—a handwritten brain dump of all my wishes and desires. I didn't separate appetizers and entrees, but I saw people going completely nuts, so a longtime chef friend suggested the categories: Miranda Style, Comfort Food, Fries with That?, My Italian Grandma, etc. For me, not being classically trained in any discipline freed me up. Being a vegetarian in the '70s, you had to discover Indian food and Asian food. I've been doing Southeast Asian and Mexican forever. I always thought American food would morph into a more international

cuisine and it hasn't really, but I like choice and so do my people. I call it the fourth-person option. You have four people come in and three of them want something adventurous like the FBOM or Chicken Jerry, and the fourth just wants old-school meat and potatoes; it's there. We have a 32-ounce Colt 45 in a paper bag for five bucks, and three-dollar Schlitz or Genesee Cream Ale, but all our taps are Maine microbrews. You can come in and get a handmade cheese pizza cooked in a brick oven and a Schlitz and leave a 20 percent tip and get out for under 20 bucks or, as a friend of mine says, "You can go to the circus."

Q. What was your reaction to being named Chef of the Year?

A. The other accolades I've received—Maine Lobster Chef of the Year, Maine Farm-to-Table Chef of the Year, were competitions. The difference is that this is from my peers. It's not about how good my food is, it's about the solidness of Cafe Miranda, its place in the food history of Maine, and the work we're doing in the community around children's hunger. It's for Rockland's coming back from being where you went for a beer and a beating. It's not about me; it's about the crew pounding it out every day. We are genuine. We are walking the walk and talking the talk. My 92-year-old dad's reaction was, "They don't know, do they," and I said, "No, and don't tell them, either." +

