

LABOR OF LOVE

Chef **PETER BALLARIN** romances Beacon Hill with his fabled French cuisine.



FOR CHEF PETER BALLARIN, IT WAS A simple decision to own a restaurant. As a youth growing up in family restaurants and bakeries, he was smitten with the kitchen. When Ballarin opened The Hungry i in 1978, it was love at first sight. “Immediately when I walked in the door,” he said, “I had that feeling that it was right for me. ‘This is it,’ I said, ‘I can do this.’”

Tucked away in charming Beacon Hill, The Hungry i is a friendly, neighborhood restaurant, known as one of the most romantic in the city. Situated in an 1840s townhouse on Charles Street, it features three cozy fireplaces, tables adorned in fine linen and china, and the soft melodies of classical music wafting through the air. “It’s very close and intimate, and tends to be quiet in that regard,” Ballarin says. “We have a lot of engagements here, sometimes small weddings.”

Ballarin recalls one of his favorite romantic scenes, straight out of a Hollywood movie. “One evening, I started a conversation with a lovely couple. After a while I just looked at them and asked, ‘Why aren’t you two married?’ And then the gentleman just turned, pulled out the ring right then, gave it to her and asked, ‘Will you marry me?’”

As an independent restaurant in Boston, The Hungry i is Ballarin’s only enterprise, and in 36 years, there’s never been a dull moment.

“We never know what’s going to happen every night. It’s a live show, it keeps you on your toes,” he says. The Hungry i is no stranger to seeing famous performers as guests and Chef Ballarin recalls an evening singer/songwriter Stephen Stills visited for dinner. “I said to him, ‘You have it easy, you just have to sing. We have to entertain them and feed them!’”

And feed them he does. The menu is a grand selection of expertly prepared French dishes, featuring favorites like frog legs Provençal and duck à l’orange. As the seventh generation in a long line of Venetian bakers, Chef Ballarin and his team bake all pastries and breads in house. “I couldn’t imagine having bread brought in. My father would kill me,” he says.

With fall weather upon us, Chef Ballarin has constructed a seasonal menu with nuances of apples, pumpkin, acorn squash, cranberries

THE HUNGRY I

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and rich sauces. “Appetites become heartier as the weather becomes cooler,” he says of transitioning from a summer menu. “The venison au poivre with peppercorn, sour cream and Burgundy sauce is excellent for autumn,” Ballarin suggests. “Especially with a nice, rich Bordeaux.” Très délicieux. —*Samantha DiMauro*