

# Mass. eatery goes from cramped to cooking in style

BY JAMES SCARPA

CAMBRIDGE, MASS. — After successfully operating his previous restaurant while having to struggle with a cramped, no-frills basement kitchen, chef-proprietor Tony Maws is eager to see what he can accomplish with elbow room and state-of-the-art culinary tools at his new Craigie On Main here.

The new restaurant is housed in a remodeled Italian eatery a couple of miles from its predecessor, the now-closed, 42-seat Craigie Street Bistrot. It houses a 95-seat dining room with a dramatic open kitchen featuring an island-style cooking suite as its focal point, plus a separate prep kitchen. Cooking gear includes two Alto-Shaam combi oven-steamers, four CVap cooking-and-holding cabinets and five thermal circulators, the latter for sous vide applications.

It's a vast step up over what he worked with at the original place for more than six years, he says.

"We were cooking with a blindfold on and one hand tied behind our backs," Maws said, "but the experience made us better cooks."

What will not change is Maws' penchant for using low-temperature cooking methods. He prefers the tenderness, moistness and fla-

vor of gently heated proteins versus the results created by the extreme heat of searing, broiling and oven-roasting. Hence the usefulness of the combi oven-steamers, which cook via steam, convection heat or a mixture of both modes; the cooking-and-holding cabinets, which heat gently with controlled humidity; and the thermal circulators, which raise vacuum-bagged sous vide items to precise temperatures.

"All of them are phenomenal for various methods of low-temperature cooking," Maws said. "This definitely opens up some new opportunities."

Maws' guests now get to observe the culinary action in the dining room, thanks to the Molteni cooking suite at its

center. He likened the atmosphere to gathering in the kitchen with close friends at a home dinner party.

Measuring 12 feet by 6 feet, the suite has a larger footprint than the entire kitchen at the original Craigie Street. It was custom designed to Maws' specifications with multiple pieces of equipment built into an integrated whole. Included are French tops with varying temperature zones and room for multiple pots and pans and two plancha grills that act, in his words, as "finishing stations," for adding color and crispness to

items like slow-cooked steak, fish and pork belly. Maws praised the productivity and versatility of the suite as well as its way of fostering collaboration among cooks.

"I wanted everyone working around one centerpiece," he said. "We can work as a team this way in a really great manner."

To build the prep kitchen, the basement of the new space was excavated to fit 8-foot ceilings and a new floor. It now houses meat and fish butchering areas, a combi, a blast chiller and an insulated wine room. The prep kitchen "was a huge project, a huge expense," Maws said, "but it's integral to the way we cook."

He plans to use the two combi ovens for cooking at service as well as for prep work.

"We wanted them upstairs and downstairs, to be able to cook things slow and low or high at the same time, and have some stuff go overnight," he said.

Although a blast chiller is more typical of a large institutional kitchen than a fine-dining spot, Maws sees his unit as a boon to productivity as well as food safety.

"It's very expensive, but it's a huge time saver," he said.

Maws is determined to maintain the feeling of the original place in the new Craigie On Main, all the bells and whistles notwithstanding.

"Our style is unpretentious, cozy and comfortable, and that won't change," he said. "We're not trying to be the 'it' restaurant here now." ■



**Tony Maws says his kitchen at Craigie on Main opens up new opportunities.**