



sunday **SUPPER**

Vinnie's Steak House & Tavern

CHEF TOM ARMSTRONG

BY PAUL SAVERY
PHOTOS BY DAVIES PHOTOGRAPHY

TOM ARMSTRONG, THE GENERAL MANAGER and chef at North Raleigh's Vinnie's Steak House and Tavern, who has been employed there since 2006, reveals that Vinnie's was named after original owner Dusty Anderson's friend and benefactor Vince McMahon, a national wrestling legend. In the early days, Vinnie's was a hangout for fellow wrestlers, though these days you are more likely to bump into legislators and businessmen as you enjoy your meal. Celebrating its 30th anniversary in 2017, the place changed hands a couple of times before steady patrons Trip and Clark Casson purchased it in 2013.

The restaurant has a clubby atmosphere, with vintage leather chairs, tables draped with white linen cloths and wood paneled walls adorned with brass light fixtures. A display wine cellar located in the center of the restaurant primarily features wine from California, with French and Italian wines also available. Ever since Tuesdays became "half-price wine day," it has become the busiest day of the week apart from the weekend.

Initially Armstrong's focus was on good execution of the items on the menu, and for the past 11 years he's added signature dishes and seasonally featured dishes which are popular. "Some good examples would be the Smoked Gouda Potato Gratin, Pecan-Crusted Scallops, Baked NC Oysters with Bacon, Collards and Brie, and of course, the Honeysuckle Ice Cream that I forage for every spring."

All the beef at Vinnie's is Certified Angus, with the most popular steaks on the menu being the Bacon Wrapped Filet Mignon and Bone-in Filet Mignon. Less well-known cuts such as Bone-in Cowboy Steak and traditional steakhouse offerings also sell well. The kitchen boasts an old flat-top grill where the steaks are seared and crusted. Seafood is a big part of their business – fortunately a good friend owns Locals Seafood, which sources some of the freshest seafood found in the Triangle, and Armstrong became their first chef

customer. Seafood is featured prominently in the appetizer section of the menu.

Armstrong has brought certain strengths, including neatness and organization, to Vinnie's. He puts a strong emphasis on teamwork in the front and back of house. "My favorite thing about cooking at Vinnie's is getting to cook every day with the team I have assembled, many of whom I have been cooking with for years now." Ultimately he follows his philosophy: "I want to cook what they [the customers] want, not what I want."

Armstrong's early childhood was spent in one of America's food meccas, New Orleans, and the city's food culture where men routinely cooked – not just meat but seafood dishes as well – had a strong influence on Armstrong. At the age of 11 his family moved to Raleigh, and after college he cooked in fast/casual establishments. Realizing his talent in the kitchen, and gaining confidence from the support and respect from his managers,

he moved to Yellowstone National Park Lodge, wearing chef whites and becoming part of a respected, elite group.

Back in Raleigh his cooking apprenticeship continued. "My formal training was at Mitchell's Catering, where I learned fundamentals; Second Empire, where I learned advanced techniques, endurance and how to work under intense pressure; and at Noble's Grille in Winston-Salem (now Rooster's), where I learned the importance of sourcing the highest quality ingredients. These days Armstrong continues to improve his craft: in New York he's cooked as a guest at Le Bernardin and Betony, a practice known as "staging", when a chef interns for a brief period (for free) in another chef's kitchen to learn new techniques.

Armstrong says he generally doesn't cook with recipes when he's at home. "I like to explore and invent," he says. "My wife has her grandmother's church cookbooks that I will refer to if I am in

the mood to bake at home. The French Laundry cookbook is by far the one that's been pulled down off the shelf in my office the most over the years for reference and inspiration." In the yard he has a neon green 1976 Weber Kettle Grill, given to him by his wife's grandfather which was first fired up on the United States' Bicentennial (July 4th, 1976).

"A couple of my go-to dishes in the kitchen at home are a pork and scallop meatloaf and a variety of Ramen preparations, my favorite being clam and chorizo with seasonal garnishes, and always poached eggs on top. We have backyard chickens, so we do a lot of egg cookery." Armstrong continues to cook daily at home on some level, and entertains at home when the restaurant is closed on Mondays.

The Sunday Supper recipe below is "delicious, simple, light, and refreshing" and Armstrong says he personally knows every one of the sources for the ingredients.



SMOKED TUNA SALAD LETTUCE WRAPS

Vinnie's Steak House & Tavern | Chef Tom Armstrong
(Serves 4 as a main course, 6-8 as an appetizer)

Brine Ingredients

- 1 quart warm water
- 150 g sea salt (about 1/3 cup)
- 75 g brown sugar (about 1/4 cup)
- 5 bay leaves
- 1/4 lemon
- 1 tsp black peppercorns
- ice

Brine Instructions

1. In warm water, dissolve salt through peppercorns. Add enough ice to bring the volume to 2 quarts.

2. Once the solution is dissolved and chilled, add the tuna steaks and brine in the refrigerator for 3 hours.
3. After 3 hours, remove the tuna from the brine, pat dry with clean kitchen towels and allow to air dry on a plate in the refrigerator for one hour.
4. Remove the steaks from the refrigerator, rub with olive oil, and season liberally with coarsely cracked black pepper.
5. Set aside at room temperature for about 30 minutes while your smoker is getting hot.

Tuna Ingredients

You will need a smoker or a grill adapted for smoking, beef and smoking material (wood chunks, chips, dust, etc.)

- 2 lbs NC yellowfin tuna, cut into 3 thick steaks (walleye, cobia or mahi-mahi would also work)
- 2 Tbsp olive oil
- 2 Tbsp coarsely cracked black pepper

Tuna Instructions

1. Whether using a smoker or a grill, you want the temperature to be between 250°-300°F.
2. Once your smoker is up to temperature, add your preferred smoking material (wood chunks, chips, dust, etc.) and allow them to begin smoking thoroughly.
3. Place the tuna steaks in the smoker. Smoke the tuna until it reaches an internal temperature of 145°F. Depending on how well the temperatures of your smoker can be regulated, this should take between 45 minutes to one hour.
4. Once the tuna is cooked to an internal temperature of 145°F, remove from the smoker and allow to cool completely.

Dressing Ingredients

- 2 eggs
- 1 Tbsp rice wine vinegar
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice
- 1 Tbsp Dijon mustard
- 8 drops Tabasco sauce (or your favorite hot sauce)
- 2 cups canola oil
- to taste sea salt and white pepper

Dressing Instructions

1. Add eggs through hot sauce to the bowl of a food processor.
2. With the food processor on medium speed, slowly stream in the canola oil until an emulsion forms.
3. Season to taste with salt and white pepper.

Ingredients for the Salad & Lettuce Wraps

- 2 ribs of celery, finely diced
- 4-5 radishes, julienned
- 2 scallions, finely diced
- 1/2 cherry tomatoes, sliced
- 1 Tbsp lemon juice
- 2 boiled eggs, chopped
- to taste sea salt and white pepper
- 20 Romaine or Bibb lettuce leaves (small to medium)

Salad Instructions

1. Once the tuna is cooked, break it apart in a mixing bowl.
2. Add the diced celery and scallions, lemon juice, and about 1 1/2 cups of the dressing. (Save any extra dressing for another use such as dressing salads, sandwiches, etc.)
3. Season with salt to taste.

To Assemble The Wraps

1. Spoon the smoked tuna salad into the lettuce leaves.
2. Garnish with chopped boiled egg, sliced cherry tomatoes, and julienned radishes.
3. Enjoy! ♦

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