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# WEEKEND BREAK

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## A visit with chef Catalano

### Well-known Astoria chef is the mastermind behind co-op meals

By M.J. CODY  
For The Astorian

**I** never thought I'd be here, doing this," said chef Andy Catalano, Astoria Co-op's manager of prepared foods.

Some may be familiar with Catalano's former enterprises such as the "after hours" fine dining experiment at Street 14 Cafe; Alimento Astoria, his meal kit delivery service; and his involvement with the North Coast Food Web. Catalano has since shifted from working in a small kitchen, maintaining close relationships with a few people and preparing what he calls simple meals, to being immersed in a commercial kitchen working in collaboration with more than 20 people.

"It's funny. In the back of my mind, I thought maybe one day I'd have a small cafe or eventually a wine bar but I hadn't imagined this monumental responsibility with the co-op," Catalano said. "I was used to the intimacy of working with farmers and local providers on pretty much a friendly one-to-one basis, carefully curating ingredients. I was not accustomed to the large volume of food necessary to procure and prepare on a weekly basis. The thing was: how to maintain my commitment to deliver everything as freshly as possible? It's a challenge but we're up to it, thanks to an amazing team of like-minded people."

So how does someone from upstate New York become established on the North Coast?

"Luck and the incomparable openness of the people here," Catalano said. "Over the past six and a half years I've been in Astoria, I've gotten to know so many locals — the farms and the lovely, generous people who are so passionate about sustainability and living a conscientious and kind life."

Catalano's love of food was planted, literally, during his third year of college, while studying abroad.

"I fell in love with the culture, the history and the cuisine of Italy," Catalano said. "When I graduated from college, I couldn't wait to get back. I joined (the Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms) and traveled around Italy living and working on organic farms."

The Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms is a cultural exchange program that provides people with room and board while working on host farms to learn ecological farming practices.

"What an experience," Catalano said. "I lived in Tuscany, Abruzzo and Umbria, working with animals, growing produce, exposed to winemaking, cheesemaking ... in one place they had these guest houses and I helped prepare meals in their little on-site restaurant, all locally sourced from our own and our neighbors' farms. The thread from job to job and place to place was enlightening and exhausting. By the time I got back to the states, I knew I was in love with food. The kitchen was where I wanted to be."

Catalano landed several jobs cooking in New York, including Brooklyn's famed pizzeria, Franny's; and Gramercy Tavern, a pinnacle in American contemporary cuisine.

"Franny's was a great place to learn doing things the right way. It was small enough, with just a handful of cooks, that I could do everything, including working with the wood burning ovens. Then at Gramercy Tavern, I was really put through the paces. I learned a ton," Catalano said. "I worked hard those years in New York, from menial tasks to sous chef, and loved every minute of it, everything about it, but I soon began to take issue with the high pressure, ego-driven culture of professional kitchens. The demanding, blustering and bullying inherent in the chef-ruled hierarchy wasn't for me. I didn't want to work in that kind of atmosphere or become one of those chefs who burn out from stress."

After Catalano decided to move away from New York's restaurant scene, he moved to Portland with his wife, Sarah Cobb. At the time, the farm to table movement was flourishing.

"It's not that we didn't have access to locally sourced foods in New York. We did," Catalano said. "But Portland's farm to table restaurant environment seemed to have a more organic established connection to the actual farms and to real people."

After a couple of years working in Portland restaurants, the couple relocated to Astoria. Catalano worked at Blue

Scorcher Bakery & Cafe and Bridgewater Bistro before his tenure at Street 14.

"Adapting a small coffee shop into a fine dining venue in the evenings didn't

work out, but I got a lot of joy from creating a new menu every week with every item locally sourced," he said. "Even though the experience at Street 14 was



Photos by Sue Cody  
**Andy Catalano stocks the Astoria Co-op's housemade foods section.**



**Catalano makes food inside Astoria Co-op.**



**Catalano prepares pasta at the North Coast Food Web.**



**Catalano shapes pasta inside the North Coast Food Web.**

*'IT'S A REAL  
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MUCH PART OF THE  
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**Andy Catalano** | manager of  
prepared foods at Astoria Co-op

wonderful and created a small, loyal following, I knew I didn't want to do that anymore."

In 2019, Astoria Co-op moved to an expanded location, off Marine Drive. Catalano took on the new prepared foods managerial position with trepidation. Through this role, Catalano and his team regularly create "grab n' go" pre-packaged salads, sandwiches, wraps, desserts, "heat n' eat" selections, takeout soups and made-to-order Korean, Mexican, Levantine, Indian, Southeast Asian inspired "Bowls of the World."

"The transition from curating and creating meals on a small scale to managing a team of about 30 people was something that I was really scared about undertaking," Catalano said. "And then there was planning and connecting with a whole new network of providers. Luckily, the Pacific Northwest has so many good sources. We use as many local suppliers as possible but the sheer volume means we go wherever we can to find the best, freshest, organic, quality foods."

"The change hasn't been as difficult as I'd imagined. During the ramp-up to open, we had about 30 working here but because of the pandemic and being unable to have our hot bar in operation, we're a team of about 20 now," Catalano said. "We are all dedicated to having a kitchen that is not ego-dominated but the 'co-op way' — that is, being collaborative, positive, helping to cultivate a healthy community and (being) passionate about the work we do."

Catalano said he tries to create an environment where each employee's ideas and feedback are heard.

"Not only do I appreciate and value ideas and feedback from the team but from the community as well. It's a much more satisfying atmosphere to work in when everyone has a stake in our success. I have a vision of what we're doing and how we'll accomplish it, but at the same time I'm not committed to a static idea," Catalano said.

Catalano said he looks forward to focusing on fresh vegetables and hosting culturally specific theme days at the co-op's hot bar once restrictions are lifted on dining establishments.

"It's a real honor being very much part of the community here," Catalano said. "Great meals don't have to be complicated but they do depend on the best ingredients. I hope we keep delivering that."

M.J. Cody is a travel writer who is the author of "Sleeping Around the Northwest," among other titles. Cody is a regular contributor to The Astorian, Coast Weekend and Our Coast magazine.