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FRIENDLY TAKEOVER: BLUSH'S NICK FARINA

By [April Lisante](#) • January 1, 2007 • [Print This Post](#) • [Post a comment](#)



Plunging headfirst into his first restaurant endeavor last spring, Nick Farina had only one thought: Let this be the right spot.

After two years as a corporate chef for Sysco, Farina was impatient to spread his wings with a place of his own, where the atmosphere would be laid back and the food classic American. He searched the Main Line with no luck — until last winter, when he saw 24 North Merion Avenue.

“I knew when I got to the breezeway. I said, ‘This is exactly what I had in mind,’” Farina says. “It was perfect. It had the perfect feel of a neighborhood place.”

The Flourtown native and longtime chef of Solaris Grill in Chestnut Hill and New York City’s Metropolitan Opera House fell in love with this cozy niche, hidden just off Lancaster Avenue, an unimposing, small space he named Blush. Eight months into his adventure, even as critics are raving about the place, Farina knows he must still mount plenty of hurdles if he’s to make his business last. After all, the venue, tucked behind the Bryn Mawr firehouse, has seen several restaurants come and go, most recently 2004’s short-lived Bianca.

“We need to keep it upscale but keep it friendly,” says Farina, 31. “I want it to be eclectic American, but with dishes that are fun. I want people to be able to have exactly what they want when they come here.” Farina chose the spot knowing that, for more than a decade, the space was home to the well-known neighborhood eatery Toscana, an unpretentious, reasonably priced Italian spot where locals could bring the whole family for monstrous plates of pasta, and Main Line notables could stop in for a quick martini and brick oven pizza.

Regulars were spotted at dinner two, three or even four nights a week, returning time and again for signatures like veal Milanese, or the restaurant’s up to nine daily fish dishes.

“The customers were loyal; we’d cater to their needs,” says Dallas Dyer, Toscana’s chef from 1999 until it shuttered in 2003. “It was like their restaurant.”

When Toscana closed its doors, some hypothesized Lancaster Avenue had simply gone the way of sushi, sports pubs and just too much competition for little Toscana.

Others, including at least one former employee, thought the restaurant’s time had passed. After 10 years, it was a dining dinosaur by Main Line standards, one whose menu had rarely strayed.

But its replacement, the stuffy and some said “fussy” Bianca, lasted only 15 months.

Backed by several local investors, Bianca chef Dominique Filoni (formerly of Savona in Gulph Mills, currently at Washington D.C.’s Four Seasons) retooled the modest space to open an ornate jewel-box eatery that critics deemed too pricey for its portions.

Its service, they said, was off and its menu too formal. Filoni actually left his post as executive chef shortly after the restaurant opened, further dooming the venture.

Enter Farina, a novice restaurateur with the perfect idea: Give the place back to the neighborhood.

Farina toned down Bianca’s curtained, tufted décor with a television at the bar, more relaxed banquette seating and a fireplace in the lounge. His moderately priced American menu allows customers to mix and match their dishes. “If customers don’t want the truffled mashed potatoes, they can substitute the orzo, or the succotash,” Farina says. “They have to have choices.”

He also started “Smokin’ Tuesdays,” a casual weekly sampling of his dishes with drink specials at the bar. “I just want a more

relaxed atmosphere, I think that's what works at this place.”

So far, the neighborhood approves.

Blush has been packed to capacity on weekends and pushing that most nights of the week. Making reservations on a Friday or Saturday is imperative. Somehow, with seating for 65 downstairs and 50 upstairs, Farina and his tightly run kitchen of just two sous chefs have been pumping out 150-plus covers per night on weekends, slightly less on weekdays.

The menu includes an extensive brunch for about \$12 per plate, and lunch, which on most days caters to a business crowd, includes an utterly unpretentious version of a cheesesteak with smoked gouda, as well as items like crab cakes, Cobb salad, fried calamari and vegetable panini, from \$11 to \$13. Dinner, with more than half a dozen appetizers ranging from \$8 to \$12 and entrees in the \$25 to \$30 range, is extensive. That allows Farina creative license to craft American, especially Southwesternstyle dishes, as well as some Southern French-inspired combinations like slowroasted salmon, mango poblano ono fish, or tomato-stewed chicken with artichoke, fennel and tomato ragout.

Here's hoping Main Liners continue to be impressed with Farina's fare — for longer than just at first blush.

Blush Bar & Restaurant

24 N. Merion Ave., Bryn Mawr

610-527-7700; dineatblush.com

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