

*I'm excited to introduce you to Darren Atkins, a dear friend and trusted resource who always makes entertaining more effortless! Warning: you will want to visit his store, plan a trip to Italy, or both!*

Walk into chef Darren Atkins's il Centro Kitchen, and you might forget you're in a stylish shop in the middle of Burlington, North Carolina. Crossing the threshold into il Centro is like walking into an authentic Italian town where you and your senses will want to take your sweet time savoring the local cuisine.

Il Centro is part neighborhood specialty shop, where you can find fresh, seasonal "daily provisions" of prepared foods, and part upscale catering business that serves individual and corporate clientele. Darren's international background and nontraditional path to becoming a chef allow him to bring a variety of culinary influences and experiences to his work.

Darren is from a small town north of Sydney, Australia, where he lived until he was seventeen. He moved to Sydney to pursue a career in the fashion business, which ultimately brought him to New York. "I was infatuated with America," he says. As a modeling agent, he worked with international clients, often in places like Milan. He became close friends with a group of Italians who talked to Darren about how they had grown up. He became enamored with Italy and the Italian culture.

"Ask any Italian where they go to find their favorite dish, and they'll say their mother's house or their grandmother's house. Food is essential to the culture there. Italian cooking is about memories, about returning to a place that was enjoyable with family and friends."

This philosophy appealed so much to Darren that he enrolled in night classes at the French Culinary Institute, now known as the International Culinary



Center, where luminaries such as Jacques Torres and Bobby Flay trained before him. There, Darren interned with acclaimed Italian chef Cesare Casella, who became his mentor and taught him the secret of authentic Tuscan home cooking: use the best quality ingredients; use what's available locally. Darren would go on to work with Casella at his two featured restaurants, Beppe and Salumeria Rosi.

After graduation, Darren tried cooking in other styles – Vietnamese, French, the American bistro style – before returning to Italian cuisine. In 2008, he worked for *Food and Wine* magazine and award-winning chef Jim Burke of New York's Caffè Storico. Later he would work

for renowned media personality and cookbook chef Lidia Bastianich at her flagship restaurant, Felidia, co-owned with Joe Bastianich and Mario Batali and led by executive chef and Michelin-star recipient Fortunato Nicotra.

Fast-forward several years, and Darren and his wife, Jan, were looking for a change of scenery; coming to Jan's native North Carolina seemed like the perfect choice. In addition to growing his specialty catering business, Darren says his mission for il Centro is "to offer nice, home-cooked Italian food that people can pick up and take home, knowing it's been prepared using local and seasonal ingredients."

Asked if he has any advice for the EE community, Darren again draws on the timeless wisdom from his mentors – all of whom, he notes, started off as home cooks:

*"It's important to know what you can and can't do. Keep things simple – maybe use a dish that only takes five ingredients. Make sure those ingredients are really fresh. A big mistake is to complicate things. You need to find the right balance in a dish – salty, fatty, acid, and sweet. If you execute the cooking of these quality ingredients well, people will be happy."*