

# Coal-fired fare

Mia Margherita builds  
menū based on  
influences of the past

BY RACHEL NIEMAN  
PHOTOS BY CHELSI BAKER

Mia Margherita, which is located at Charles Pointe Commons in Bridgeport, features coal-fired pizzas that chefs prepare in an exposed cooking area open to the dining room so customers can see the coal-firing process.



**When customers enter Mia Margherita,** they're surrounded by deep burgundy walls, rustic brick, glossy countertops and the aroma of freshly prepared food. It's classy and sleek with beautiful touches of rustic Italia. It's bustling and busy, even on a Thursday night, as families, groups of friends and couples are all enjoying one another's company, gathered around pizza pies. An open-air ceiling above features industrial-looking piping, black as the coal that fuels the oven, which is out in the open for all to see.

That oven, imported from the West Coast and one of only two coal-fired ovens in the state, burns through nearly 100 pounds of coal each day at temperatures of 800 to 1,000 degrees. The pizzas bake in a matter of minutes under such high heat.

Though the restaurant only opened its doors in December 2013, it is steeped in rich history. Harrison County is renowned for its connections to both Italian and Appalachian heritage. As such, the food at Mia Margherita is from and familiar to the San Giovanni Calabrian region of Italy, paying homage to the immigrants who came in the early 1900s to mine coal.

But the importance of coal in the restaurant has history that goes further back than the Harrison County Italian-Appalachian connection.

"The reason we chose that style of cooking was because that was the way pizza was originally introduced in the United States," said Scott Duarte, founder of the restaurant. "Usually (in Italy) pizza was cooked with wood, but in New York City, wood wasn't practical so they used coal."

That heat-generating substitution has suited pizza just fine. The result is a thin, artisan-style pizza with a beautifully crispy crust. Moisture is retained at the center of the pie, so it's slightly chewy, too, giving customers the best of both worlds.

In an area known for its Italian traditions, Duarte wanted to make sure the restaurant would be a proper fit. Before opening, he welcomed a designer to Bridgeport on a Labor Day weekend — during the West Virginia Italian Heritage Festival, one of the biggest celebrations of Italian culture in the United States.

"We took her to the festival and said, 'Look around — this is why we're doing what we're doing,'" Duarte said.

Helping Duarte is general manager Patrick Lesmann, who is simply thrilled to be part of Mia Margherita.

"A lot goes into opening a new restaurant. We've learned new things along the way," he said. "We're really excited to be a part of the community. We've already won the New Business of the Year Award in Harrison County earlier in the year. We just really appreciate the support we've received."

Mia Margherita has certainly immersed itself in the hyper-local culture, offering live tunes from local musicians and emphasizing the use of locally grown produce. The Bridgeport Farmers Market is right across the street.

"It really makes us a part of the community. We know where most of our food came from. We know that the farmer we see every Sunday is where we get our sausage or our fresh



Tim Goots (left), executive chef, and Billy Johnson, pizzaiola, prepare a traditional and a dessert pizza during the dinner rush at Mia Margherita. The restaurant also features a full-service bar for its patrons.



tomatoes," Lesmann said. "We make sure (our staff) is knowledgeable about how we make our food, where we source our products, so they can enjoy that dialogue with the customers."

Not only is it good for the local economy, but also for the distinct taste of their foods.

"It boils down to using good quality, fresh ingredients, treating it with love, not trying to over-season and using local ingredients whenever possible," Duarte said.

This was inspired by his upbringing in the North View neighborhood of Clarksburg.

"I come from a half-Italian and half-Spanish family. A lot of my influence comes from that heritage, eating out of your garden and pasta dinners every Sunday," he said. "It's all about enjoying and celebrating food."

Duarte said customers can expect to see some familiar comfort foods prepared in an inviting way on the menu. He calls the fare "peasant-style Italian" food, a style that allows each ingredient to highlight itself. The Margherita pizza, a must-try, is the quintessential example — four simple elements: crust, red tomato sauce, fresh mozzarella and green basil. In 1889, this pizza was kept simple on purpose so as to represent the Italian flag in honor of Princess Margherita of Savoy.

Although best known for its pizzas, the menu at Mia Margherita has impressive breadth. There are a slew of sandwiches, risottos, soups and salads served with tasty homemade dressings. Most of the items are served in a way that is easy to share amongst friends and family.

Try the juicy coal-fired lemoncello wings or the Piemonte pie, a white pizza covered with wild mushrooms, fresh arugula salad and truffle oil. A must-try is the hot sausage and peppers, which features chunks of spicy Italian sausage amongst pepper rings that have that fresh-out-of-grandma's-garden taste. Another big hit on the menu is the menesha, a homemade comfort soup that features a chicken broth base, Italian sausage, coal-fired chicken, greens and potatoes. A salad consisting of raw baby kale, topped with egg, garlic breadcrumbs and dotted with crisp fried pepperoni served with homemade anchovy vinaigrette is a perfect way to start a meal.


Working at a restaurant can make one feel a little bit jaded by the menu offerings, but even after nearly a year, that hasn't been the case for Lesmann.

"I eat something different here every single day and like it every single day. Paninis, salads, pizzas, a huge selection of Italian wines — there's something on the menu to satisfy everyone," he said.

In addition to fabulous food in a charming atmosphere, customers can expect warm and welcoming hospitality.

"We're always trying to improve. We listen to feedback and incorporate those ideas into what we do," Duarte said. "I think you'll find it fresh and inviting. It's a very casual dining experience."

Check out more of Mia Margherita's menu and history online at [www.miamargherita.com](http://www.miamargherita.com).

*Mia Margherita is located at 139 Conference Center Way, Suite 137 at Charles Pointe Commons in Bridgeport. For more information, call 304-808-6400.* 



## MENESHA

1/2 pound Italian rope sausage (sweet or hot)  
3 medium Russet potatoes  
2 tablespoons vegetable oil  
3 tablespoons shallot  
1 tablespoon minced garlic  
1 pound pulled chicken  
1 cup kale (washed, stemmed and roughly chopped into bite-sized pieces)  
1 cup escarole (washed, stemmed and roughly chopped into bite-sized pieces)  
64 ounces chicken stock  
Salt and pepper to taste

Place rope sausage on baking sheet and bake in oven at 350 degrees for 20 minutes or until an internal temperature of 160 is reached. Allow to cool and cut into 1/4-inch coins. Set aside. Season one pound of chicken with salt and pepper and roast in oven at 350 degrees for 15 to 20 minutes until an internal temperature of 160 is reached. Bake potatoes at 350 degrees for 35 to 40 minutes until fully cooked but not too soft. Allow to cool. Peel and medium dice. Set aside. Get a large bowl of ice water ready to shock greens. Blanch greens in boiling water for 1 minute. Immediately pull them out and place in ice bath to stop cooking process. Set aside. In a heavy-bottom sauce pot, heat oil over medium heat. When oil glistens, add precooked sausage. Allow to cook for a couple minutes. Add shallot and garlic. Allow to cook a minute more. Add chicken stock. Bring to a simmer. Add chicken and potatoes. Simmer for 10 minutes. Add greens and cook an additional 5 minutes.