

# Portobello – fine Italian cuisine from the coast of Sardinia to the coast of New Bedford



*Cioppino: Mussels, Little Necks, Shrimp, Scallops, Calamari, Salmon in a delightful tomato bouillabaisse and toasted Ciabatta.*

Sardinia is one of five autonomous regions of Italy and is the second largest island in the Mediterranean after its neighbor, Sicily. It is autonomous because its history and culture are distinctively different than the rest of Italy, and its language (Sardu) incomprehensible to Italian speakers.

While this proud island has had inhabitants for almost 40,000 years, its oldest culture is represented by that of the *Nugaric* who have been present since at least 1500 B.C.E. Remnants of their civilization are still present in the sacred wells, tombs and thousands of *Nuraghi* or stone, round tower-

fortresses.



*Sardinia: birthplace  
and foundation for  
Pietro Chessa's fare.*

In the years leading up to the 15th century, when it began keeping a census, Sardinia had been sacked, raided or completely taken over by Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Vandals, Romans, and Spain among others. In 1948, Sardinia received its status as an autonomous region of Italy. This potpourri of cultures still exists today, as there are foreign national residents from dozens of nations living there, and the island generates the majority of its economy through tourism.

Sardinia has 1,100 miles of rocky coastline, made up mostly of granite, limestone and basalt. There are mountain ranges, rivers, deep bays, inlets, and alluvial valleys and a continental climate – moderate precipitation except in the summer, significant annual temperature variation, cold winters and cool summers on the mountains and mild winters and hot summers on the coasts.

From Sassari to New Bedford

**What does history, geography and climate have to do with cuisine? Why does an article about a restaurant begin with these things? If you think my writing is a pile of hoo-ha and want the “goods,” skim to the section on food. These elements of Sardinia’s history have everything to do with what Pietro and Mairy Chessa are doing at their upscale restaurant, Portobello. They can’t be separated. For who the chef is, is**

integral to what he creates, the atmosphere and decorum he provides, and most importantly to his motivation, passion and inspiration.

Sardinia is not a heavily populated region. Its capital and most populated city, *Cagliari* only counts 160,000 residents. *Sassari*, where Pietro was born and raised, has slightly more residents than New Bedford, with 120,000 people. Like New Bedford, *Sassari* is near the coast where seafood is a part of the industry and influences the cuisine. If you put a plate of processed, stale seafood in front of a resident from either city, you will get an ear beating. One does not pull the wool over the eyes, when it comes to seafood.



*Portobello opened in the newly renovated Standard-Times building at 555 Pleasant Street.*

Having grown up in a Sicilian household, I am familiar with rustic, home cooked, comfort food. It's a characteristic of both Sicily and Sardinia. No part of the animal was wasted, ingredients were culled from whatever was nearby, and there certainly is no arrogance, pomp or glam. It is feet on the ground, stick to your belly, make you happy, happy fare. This is the foundation of what Pietro does. It is who he is, where he comes from, what everything he does, is built upon.

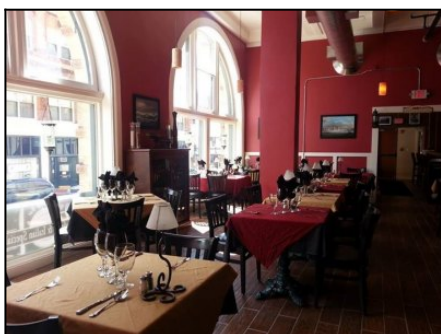
The multi-cultural character of Sardinia is well-represented in the menu at Portobello. While there is plenty of seafood,

as one would expect from a Sardinian at the helm, there is much that is Italian. It's present in the traditional sauces and combination of ingredients like Chicken Marsala, Pasta Bolognese, Bisetecca al Pepe (chargrilled Rib-Eye steak with a demi-glace of peppercorns, brandy, and cream), Puttanesca, and Veal Picatta. Pietro pays homage to the nation that is sovereign over his home island, but he also takes a jab, like any Sardinian worth his salt, at the traditional dishes by adding his own flare. A sort of gustatory railing out against authority.

#### Various European influences

**So how did Pietro go from humble to upscale? There is no way he could separate himself from his rock-solid upbringing. That is a foundation as impervious to replacement as the granite cliffs that decorate the Sardinian coastline. One can only influence, not remove. A Sardinian could never cook up and offer Fugu on gold flaked covered caviar, with a side of saffron-infused Oca and foam of seaweed and five year old soy. I made that dish up, but I think you get the picture.**

By the time Pietro was 14 years of age, he – like most Italians – already had a life-time of cooking. Pietro has fond memories of being chased and teased by older siblings and running to the safety of his mother Giovanna who was seemingly always cooking in the kitchen. Those aromas, sounds of pots boiling sauces, the vivid colors of local produce and most notably the loving-kindness from his mother left indelible marks on Pietro. Here he developed a powerful love and passion for cooking.



*Tuscan style decor,  
antique and modern  
lighting, and  
wonderful ambience.  
(David St. Germain)*

When he was 14 years old, he left for Munich and worked in various restaurants, utilizing his Sardinian and Italian background to its fullest while sponging up the lessons from some of the greatest chefs on earth. Yes, you read that right: he was cooking in restaurants at the tender age of 14.

When he was 18 years old, he left Munich for a gig in Australia. However, a long layover en route at Los Angeles, led to meeting his future wife, who encouraged and convinced Pietro to stay and showcase his skill in Los Angeles and Santa Monica. Pietro would do just that for a number of years, including stints in Boston and Sandwich before coming to New Bedford and starting Sassari's and Cafe Balena.

**Approach, atmosphere, ambience**

**All of these influences are brought to bear at Portobello which is on Pleasant Street in the old Renaissance Revival-style building Standard-Times building, built in 1894. The restaurant which includes a two dining rooms, a bar, and private function room, advertises itself as "Serving steak, seafood, and Italian specialties."**

The building which has been scooped up in 2011, has been gutted and millions have been spent, and are being spent on improvements. Large, arched windows allow an expansive view in or out of the eatery. On approach one can peer into the main dining room and gaze upon diners. The lighting and glimpse at the decor paint a romantic picture.



*Touched up photo show  
the classy, formal  
setting. (Kate  
Martinsen)*

One need only take a few steps and turn right to enter into the stunning and densely decorated dining room and bar. There are folk paintings of Italian scenes and work from local artists, floral arrangements, and ample lighting provided by antique and modern lamps. There is dark wood – natural and stained – everywhere: the bar, chairs, tables, and antique cabinets. The centerpiece is a commissioned just for Pietro, unique, steel framed mare. The walls are painted in Tuscan oranges and yellows. The music being piped in is contemporary Italian and Italian-American classics that alternate from Italian language songs to Sinatra, Bennett, and Martin. On some evenings, Portobello features live music of the Jazz standard variety. I have also heard a rumor that there is a waiter who sings opera.

A lot of work, effort and surely money went into decorating these rooms. If something is worth doing, it's worth doing right. The music, lighting and decor combined with black napkin table settings to create a welcoming, warm and wonderful ambience.

What you came for: the food

**Greeted warmly behind the counter by the bartender, we waited just seconds when our friendly waitress, Jo-Anne welcomed and immediately sat us near one of the arched windows. Being a lover of local history and especially of the downtown area we are in (historically known as Cheapside) this was, in my**



**opinion the best seat in the house.**

Within moments Jo-Anne returned to take our drink orders and deposit some wonderfully, fresh-baked **garlic-knot rolls** that were lightly tossed in *parmesan* and olive oil. A refreshing break from the filling “ruin your meal” bread baskets and saucer of dipping sauce.



*Seared King Cut Cod  
with Roma Tomatoes,  
Asparagus on a bed of  
made from scratch  
mashed potatoes.*

The drinks section of the menu had a variety of beers and sparkling, blush red and white wines to choose from. In terms of cocktails, there were ten Martinis to choose from: Espresso, Tiramisu, Banana Coconut Cream Pie, Candy Apple, La Gioconda (Campari, Stolichnaya Vodka, Peach Schnapps, Champagne) to name a few. Mike, a lover of Chiantis, chose a Tuscan variety and I chose the house Cabernet which was Woodbridge (California). Both did not disappoint.

Poring over the daily specials blackboard made the decision on what to get even more difficult. There were some stellar sounding dishes. For appetizers there are soups, salads and a variety of starters to choose from: in terms of soup there was a New England Style Clam & Corn chowder, a traditional *Straciatella* – a sort of egg drop soup with baby spinach and parmigiano, and Tuscan Tomato soup.

In the salad department, one can choose from Caesar,

Portobello (grilled portobellos, organic baby greens, balsamic vinaigrette), Greek, Tri-Colore (Rughetta, Belgian Endive, Radichhio, parmigiano, citrus vinaigrette) and an Angiolina.

For starters, there was fried Ravioli, bruschetta, steamed shrimp cocktail, caprese, carpaccio, Ahi Tartare, Pan-seared scallops (w/ organic greens and key lime Buerre Blanc), Calamari, grilled Portobellos, and Guazzetto – sauteed squid with julienned potatoes, garlic and a spicy tomato sauce.

Sardinian Proverb: *Ama si cheres essere amadu* – If you want to be loved, love.

**Mike got thee Tuscan Tomato Soup and I ordered the Angiolina salad and we added the Calamari for good measure.**

I dislike Tomato Soup. I've only ever had the canned variety and I could rarely tell the difference between that and accidentally swallowing water at the beach. At Mike's behest, I tried Pietro's version and thought "Where has this been, all my life?" Instead of a watery, beach-water flavored concoction, this mixture of broth and diced tomatoes tasted like...well, tomato soup! Good. Mouth-watering good.

The **Angiolina Salad** was a bed of organic greens, topped with candied walnuts, cranberries, shaved parmiginao and balsamic vinaigrette. All the ingredients in their place in a symphony of complimentary flavors – no one stealing the show, everyone working together.



*Life changing  
Calamari.*

The calamari...oh, the calamari. I was whisked away to a grill



on a sunny Sardinian beach. Fresh sea air washing over me, my toes buried in the sand, and surrounded by lovely Sardinian...um, flowers. Lend me a bit of liberty here with my hyperbole: this calamari changed my life. This was getting nailed broadside. This calamari was not breaded and fried. It was lightly seasoned, char-grilled and served whole – head to tail – with a pureed Parsley dipping sauce.

The freshness of this squid, the cooked *al dente* – a perfect balance of of tender and snap, and the char...an amazing level of char, that is not burnt, but about flavor. What a marriage. If the meal ended right now, I would have been more than happy. Surely nothing could top this. This was one of the best things I have ever tasted.

#### Entrees, dessert and summation

**All the standards and classics of Italian cuisine, as well as some more modern offerings are represented at Portabello: Veal Saltimbocca, Lobster & Shrimp Scampi, Filetto (Grilled Filet Mignon w/ a Pink Peppercorn Demi-Glace), Salmon w/ a Pesto Crust, Risotto and Ravioli of the Day, Pesto, Chicken Picatta, Pollo Contadino, Lobster fra Diavolo, Swordfish Puttanesca and more.**

Mike decided on the **Cod** – pan roasted Captain's cut with roma tomatoes, mashed potato and asparagus. The cod was fresh from that morning's trolling the waterfront – flaky, tender and slightly nutty. The roma tomatoes and vivid green asparagus brightened up the dish. Of course, the made from scratch mashed potatoes complimented the cod, as they always do.



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I chose the "Ravioli of the Day" from the blackboard: **Butternut Squash Ravioli with Pink Parmesan**. Amazing. Delicate, clearly made from scratch ravioli bursting with the right amount of slightly sweet, fresh butternut squash and the savory Pink Parmesan sauce paired perfectly. These may have topped the calamari. Choosing would be like the proverbial choosing a favorite child. Can't be done without a broken heart somewhere.

For dessert we enjoyed a **Zabaione**: A martini glass of whipped, light, airy custard, topped with freshly made whipped cream, and sweetened with champagne. Absolutely delightful. We topped the evening off with a fine espresso and an amazing lemon-liqueur delight, Limoncello.

If you are looking for the perfect marriage of Sardinian and Italian cuisine paired into something presented originally by an inspired chef, you can't go wrong with Pietro Chessa's Portobello. Here is a man that lives and breathes cooking. His entire life has been spent in its pursuit. He rises each morning and heads to Sid Wainer for the freshest produce and meats, and hits up the waterfront for the daily catch. His bounty that morning will dictate that day's specials. Pietro pays top dollar for the best ingredients, bought in small quantities not bulk. The menu prices reflect this high standard, and it is worth every penny.

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*Be sure to park anywhere on Union Street or any street adjacent to Pleasant Street. While we were there, virtually every space was occupied by a police unit or their off-duty vehicles making it nearly impossible to park on Pleasant Street. While there is no dress-code per se, you will want to leave the t-shirt at home. The average entree is priced*

*between \$15-\$20. More reviews for Portobello can be read [here](#)*

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## **Portobello**

555 Pleasant Street

New Bedford, Massachusetts

Phone: (774) 206-6622

### **Hours of Operation:**

*Tuesday-Sunday: 5:00pm-9:30pm*

**Facebook:** [facebook.com/pages/Portobello/773432202708568](https://facebook.com/pages/Portobello/773432202708568)

### **Photos:**

[facebook.com/pages/Portobello/773432202708568?sk=photos\\_stream](https://facebook.com/pages/Portobello/773432202708568?sk=photos_stream)

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