

# In the Kitchen with... Chef Christopher Atamian

BY LORI DRAZ

Positive, upbeat and easy-going, Christopher Atamian is called “the nicest chef I’ve ever worked with” by his staff. He and his wife, Alexandria, are the owners of Porcini Italian Trattoria in Highlands, which celebrated its eighth anniversary in July.

Christopher remembers his start, “I picked this path in eighth grade. My mom was a nurse and I didn’t want to wait until 9 pm for her to make dinner, so I got started cooking for my whole family. I knew cooking would be something I could love for a lifetime.”

Eager to begin, Chris attended the Culinary Education Center at Brookdale while he was in high school and continued there until he got his degree. Brookdale also referred him to his first job was at Bay Avenue Trattoria, which was also where he met Alexandria. It was love at first sight, and now 15 years later, this busy couple is married and the parents of two boys and a “darling little girl,” all under age 6. Though he’s still small, Chris says their oldest, 5-year-old Benjamin, is already playing chef and considering a career in food.

“I approach each day with excitement at what the best ingredients will bring,” he said. “There’s nothing boring in the restaurant business, and I am so happy to have my wife, partner and best friend running the front of the house while I’m cooking.”

Chris is also the dessert chef and does all the baking, including his popular cheesecakes with the weekly rotating flavors.

### What is your favorite way to relax on a day off?

With three kids, it’s tough to find too much time, but I love playing with the kids in our home. Alexandria and I also enjoy gardening. She comments, “We love to grow tomatoes. We also grow zucchini and tempura fry and stuff the squash blossoms with lemon-scented ricotta, drizzled with local honey, balsamic and crushed hazelnuts for a popular appetizer at the restaurant.”

### Do you have a favorite ingredient?

Mushrooms. I love them so much, I named the restaurant Porcini. I like all



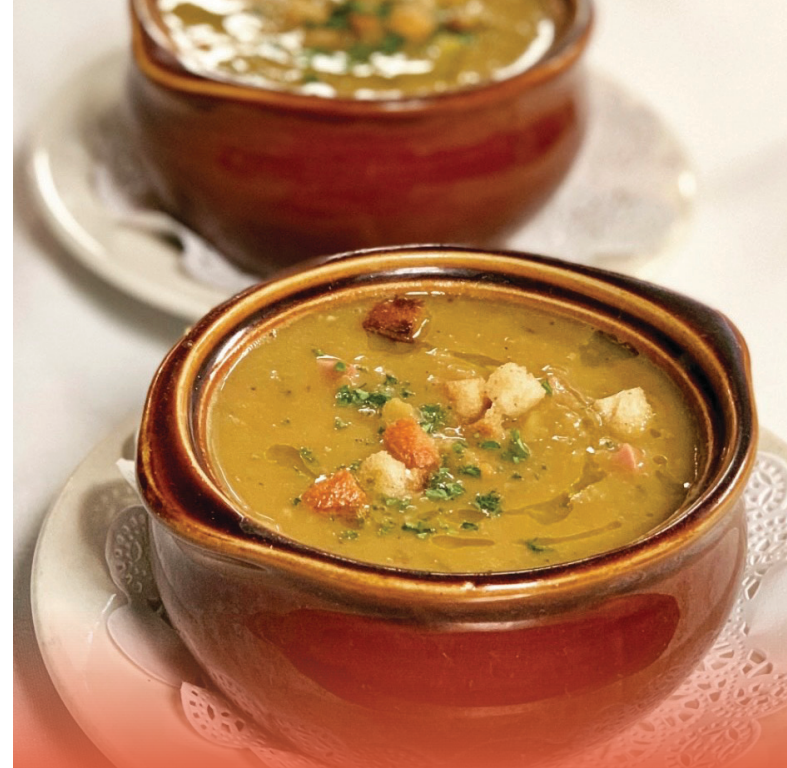
kinds, but porcini and maitake or hen of the woods are real favorites. I use them in my mushroom tarte, which is a puff pastry shell with confit onions and blend of wild mushrooms, topped with goat cheese. I also tempura fry them for showy, frilly garnish.

### What is your favorite item in your kitchen?

My most often used and favorite item is my KitchenAid stand mixer. Alexandria adds, “With little kids, I’m always using it for baking items and of course cookies, cookies, cookies. It’s a workhorse. I also give my chicken shredder a regular workout. Chicken tacos are popular in our home, and it makes the job much easier.

### Anything else you want to share?

We both can’t say thanks enough to our loyal customers who have supported us over our eight years. Many of them have become an extended family. They knew us throughout our journey, from the time we had just started dating right through now. They kept us busy throughout the lockdown, which kept our restaurant alive and helped us build our full-service catering business. We’re taking holiday catering orders too. I also want to remember the late Chef Joe Romanowski and thank him for his inspiration. And home cooks, stay happy and don’t get discouraged. Cooking is a daily adventure.



## Chef Atamian’s favorite at-home recipe:

### Butternut Squash Soup with Cinnamon Sugar Croutons

#### Cinnamon Sugar Croutons

- 1 loaf French bread diced and exterior crust removed
- Butter
- ½ cup sugar
- 2 tsp. cinnamon

Combine the cinnamon and the sugar in a bowl. Over medium heat melt some butter in a pan and add the bread in small batches so as not to burn. Once the bread is toasted, sprinkle the cinnamon sugar on the bread and toss to coat evenly. Remove from the pan and set aside until ready for use.

#### Butternut Squash Soup

- 2 tbsp. butter
- 1 cup diced onion
- 5 cups diced butternut squash
- ½ cup diced carrot
- 1 green apple, peeled, cored and diced
- 4 cups water
- 1 bay leaf
- Salt and pepper

Melt the butter, add the onions and cook over medium heat until beginning to brown. Add the remaining ingredients and bring to a boil. Reduce the heat to a simmer and cook until the vegetable are tender, about 20 minutes. Remove the bay leaf and season lightly. Blend the soup in small batches and season once more if needed. Top with cinnamon sugar prepared croutons.