



mom grows best

Chef Jason Capps' secret ingredients are growing at his mother's Greene County farm.

*by Cynthia Navadeh
photos by Heather Mull*

MOTHERS DO A LOT for their children: tie their shoes, drive them to the mall, pay their college tuition. Jason Capps' mother does much more: she grows the organic vegetables and herbs he wants for his catering business.

This year, Jason wants to make more pesto. So Judy Cholak, on her Greene County farm, planted six times more basil. Jason also wants long, straight cucumbers for hors d'oeuvres, so Judy is growing them on trellises. He likes colorful food, so she grows orange and yellow tomatoes as well as red ones. "Chefs, they get creative," Judy says with a fond smile.

At least he appreciates her. "My mom has done so much for me," Jason says. "I've been blessed with a mother who's said, 'Whatever you want to do, you can do it. You have my support.' "

What he's always wanted to do is cook. Jason, 39, started Greco's Gourmet Catering — it's Judy's maiden name — in 1999. In 2006, he built Bella Sera, a 20,000-square-foot banquet hall in Canonsburg.

This summer, in Market Square Downtown, he plans to open Bella Sera on the Square, a bistro and wine bar he describes as "urban Italian."

FAMILY TRADITIONS

Jason's cooking draws heavily on his mother's Italian heritage. His catering package for brides, for instance, offers not only a station for pasta but one for risotto, the traditional Italian rice. He travels to Italy to visit extended family and pick up new ideas.

In season, he relies on Judy for 35 to 45 percent of his fresh produce: tarragon, thyme, flat-leaf parsley, dill, oregano, chives, sage, rosemary, peppers, tomatoes, zucchini and yellow squash, among others. All this comes from a 1 ½-acre plot that Judy tends while holding down a full-time job in social work.

It is good to know that her labor is not strictly for love: Jason pays the market rate for her produce.

Jason also learned a lot from his father's side of the family. His paternal grandparents started out in the food business in 1949, selling steak sandwiches and fries at a concession stand. As a youth, Jason spent summers helping at their New Jersey restaurant. Later, he joined his uncle's catering business near Philadelphia. He went on to hotels and resorts including Nemacolin Woodlands and Seabrook Island, and was catering chef for Dean & DeLuca in New York City before returning to Pittsburgh.

GOING GREEN

Earlier this year, Greco's became a certified "green" caterer — the first in Pennsylvania and one of only five nationwide. Jason recycles and composts. He has banned Styrofoam and arranged for a biofuels company to pick up used kitchen grease. In all, Greco's has completed 10 "environmental steps" required by the Green Restaurant Association, a Boston-based nonprofit group that, for a fee, helps restaurateurs become environmentally sustainable. ►

► "It's not a trend, it's a movement that all of us will be expected to gravitate toward," Jason says of the restaurant industry's burgeoning interest in the environment. Food stars Mario Batali and Joe Bastianich have obtained GRA certification; so have a couple of hundred other food purveyors across the nation, ranging from upscale restaurants to coffeehouses to Microsoft's corporate dining operations.

Nobody yet has hired Greco's specifically because it's green, Jason says, but many clients like the concept.

WEB COOKING

Jason grins at the video camera as he cracks an egg over a mound of flour, then glances toward his wife. "It's fine to do this with your children! Make a little bit of a mess on a Saturday!" he crows, and starts stirring up a batch of fresh egg pasta.

For this cooking class – "Pasta Making and Perfect Risotto" – Jason's on-site audience at Bella Sera includes his wife, Chris (who, presumably, is accustomed to the havoc Jason and their two children wreak in their home kitchen). His mother is there as well, along with 20-some other students, mostly women, a few couples.

But there's also another audience, watching over the Internet, for this is the first Web cast of Jason's new, online cooking school, Meet Me in the Kitchen. About 25 people are paying \$19.95 each to watch Jason and two other chefs demonstrate a menu including Spring Asparagus Risotto and Pasta with Peas and Mint, says Camera Bartolotta, who helped develop the show. On-site students, who get to eat the food, pay \$60.

The idea is for people to invite their friends over to view the live Web cast and cook along with Jason, she says. Recipes and shopping lists can be downloaded in advance. "For less than \$20, you get a personal kitchen coach," Camera says. "If you get in trouble, Twitter." Indeed, an on-line

viewer tweets an inquiry about the wines served during the first Web cast and receives an almost-instant answer.

A guest chef for the class, Frank Lombardi of Catering by Framboise in New York City, approaches food as energetically as Jason does. Begin mixing the flour and egg with a fork, "then jump in with your hands!" he says, demonstrating.

But Jason – thinking, after all, of a potential mess at home? – counsels a bit of caution. "If you dump the flour in all at once," he warns, "you'll end up with it on the ceiling." •

This was one of the dishes demonstrated for the Web cast.

spinach gnocchi (malfatti di ricotta)

**2 cups chopped frozen spinach,
equivalent to three 10-ounce boxes,
thawed and squeezed**

**1 cup grated Parmesan cheese, plus
extra for topping**

**1½ cups unbleached all-purpose flour,
divided**

1 cup ricotta cheese

2 large eggs

¼ teaspoon grated nutmeg

1 teaspoon salt

½ teaspoon ground black pepper

3 ounces butter, melted

In a large mixing bowl, combine the chopped spinach with the cup of Parmesan, ½ cup of the flour, ricotta, eggs, nutmeg, salt and pepper. Mix well. Shape the spinach mixture into ovals about the size of a walnut. Roll each one in the remaining flour. Bring a pot of lightly salted water to boil and cook the gnocchi a few at a time until they float to the surface. Drain in a colander and arrange on a serving dish. Pour melted butter over gnocchi and sprinkle with extra Parmesan.

Yields about 60 gnocchi, serving 4 as a main course or 8 as an appetizer.

Cook's note: To substitute fresh spinach, sauté until wilted. Cool. Drain and squeeze out all liquid. Chop, taking care to leave no large pieces.

