

Vermont restaurants make time for family meal

A behind-the-scenes look at what the staff eat and what it means

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SOUTH BURLINGTON — Last Thursday afternoon at Pulcinella's Italian restaurant, chef-owner Sam Palmisano was frying up sweet and sour tempura-battered cauliflower made with generous quantities of curry powder and spicy Asian chili sauce.

Palmisano was not testing out a radical new menu concept; he was preparing what is called staff or family meal for his employees before a busy night of work.

Although not offered at every restaurant, many of the larger full-service, independent dining establishments in the area prepare a family-style meal for staff about an hour before lunch or dinner guests start arriving.

The tradition of family meal, which Palmisano picked up during the eight years he worked at the now-defunct Villa Tragara in Waterbury, has come into the public eye more recently thanks to a number of cookbooks featuring family meal recipes from high-profile restaurants and a general fascination with behind-the-scenes restaurant culture.

In the introduction to his fall 2011 book, "The Family Meal: Home Cooking with Ferran Adria," the legendary chef-owner of El Bulli, the now-shuttered Spanish restaurant, explains: "The family meal is the dinner eaten every day by the 75 members of staff at El Bulli restaurant. We call it that because the staff members are like a family, and the family meal is an important moment when everyone sits down together to eat. You might assume that the staff would eat the same food as the guests, but they don't ... we eat ordinary food. Why is the family meal so important at El Bulli? The answer is very simple: we believe that if we eat well, we cook well."

Another book on the topic due out this fall, "Restaurant Staff Meals: The Food that Fuels the World's Kitchens" by Christine Carroll and Jody Eddy, will share family meal recipes from famous restaurants such as New York City's Per Se, Cochon in New Orleans and The Fat Duck in England.

Restaurant-style home cooking

The dishes cooked for family meal are typically simpler and easier for home cooks to re-create than a restaurant's menu items. For restaurant cooks, they offer a different type of creative challenge and opportunity.

At Pulcinella's, the responsibility for cooking family meal rotates between Palmisano, 40, and two of his cooks. The 4 p.m. meal feeds five to 10 staff members, both kitchen and front-of-the-house ([servers](#), host, bartender), depending on the day of the week.

Sometimes the food is classic Italian such as pasta Bolognese or pizza and salad. Other nights, Palmisano might riff on the Korean food heritage of his fiancée and front-of-the-house manager, Kyla Drew, and offer pork and kimchi egg rolls; or sous-chef, Nick Eddy, 29, might bring in masa flour to

combine with odds and ends from the walk-in cooler for Salvadoran-style pupusas: meat, onion and cheese in cornmeal dough.

On Thursday, two cooks, two servers and a dishwasher helped themselves to generous servings of steamed brown rice topped with crunchy nuggets of sweet-spicy cauliflower. It is a family meal favorite, a vegan and gluten-free recipe Palmisano created to accommodate various dietary needs of his staff based on a dish he had eaten at Tamarind, a New York City Indian restaurant.

Another favorite is Palmisano's version of a Jucy Lucy, the fabled inside-out cheeseburger from Minneapolis, which he likes to pair with duck fat fries, but it can only be served when the scheduled staff members are all carnivorous.

As everyone bellied up to the restaurant's bar to eat, Palmisano stood on the other side and updated them on the daily soups and other specials, as well as some general housekeeping issues.

"I like family meal because it brings everyone together," he said later. "I can't compete with the chains pay-wise, so we try to make up for it in other ways."

It's about community

Another fall 2011 release, "Off the Menu: Staff Meals from America's Top Restaurants" by Marissa Guggiana, included Michael's on the Hill in Waterbury as one of 51 featured restaurants, offering up its recipe for a cozy red wine lamb stew served over polenta with a ramp gremolata, a simple condiment made with wild ramp leaves and lemon.

Chef-owner Michael Kloeti was first exposed to the tradition of family meal while training in his native Switzerland. The experience continued when he moved to New York City where he worked in [high-end](#) restaurants including Lespinasse and the St. Regis Hotel before relocating his family to Vermont to open Michael's on the Hill in 2002.

"It's all about the community, the family meal," he explained over the phone. "The whole purpose is to get together. No cellphones." It is a time to touch base, Kloeti continued, to see how everyone's doing.

"It's when you really get a feel for the staff and any problems or issues. It's like having a meeting every day but you don't have to call a meeting. It's an opportunity to listen well as an owner. The same as at home, dinner is the time to talk things over with the family."

At Michael's on the Hill, family meal feeds between six to 12 employees depending on the night. It is often cooked by the staff member who comes in a little later than everyone else and closes the restaurant at the end of the night, Kloeti said.

The meal is usually served buffet-style. Sometimes it's leftover menu items, such as the lamb stew, or dishes featuring perfectly edible ingredients that just don't [fit](#) on the menu, such as Swiss chard stems. "We use the leaves on the menu," Kloeti explained. "The stems, they don't look good but they taste really good."

A constant theme in family meal recipes is frugal use of scraps from menu items. "There's always something to use," Kloeti said. "We combine the trim from beef tenderloin with the ends of smoked pork loin and make meat loaf. We buy beautiful organic chickens, but we don't use the wings so we make chicken wings. We do eat well."

Chicken wings and more

From El Bulli in Spain to A Single Pebble in Burlington, chicken wings seem to be a standard family meal offering.

While they were not on the menu at Monday afternoon's family meal at A Single Pebble, they do show up frequently, said chef-owner Chiuho Duval. "We do them with a lot of different sauces," she said. "We even have Frank's Red Hot sauce in the kitchen — just for family meal."

Duval, 39, said the restaurant's family meals, which feed between 8 and 15 staff members, are "a great opportunity to gather everybody together." At A Single Pebble, the meals are also used to do [trial](#) runs of specials and new recipes, train cooks on new and classic menu items and enable servers to become familiar with every dish.

Each cook working the meal is responsible for contributing two to three dishes to the array that will be put on a Lazy Susan in the center of one of the restaurant's big round tables. If there is no specific dish that needs a trial run, the cooks look for ingredients that need to be used up, such as "fish that's still good but not good enough to serve the customer for dinner," Duval said. Sometimes, they just flex their creative muscles, like a recent re-use of the restaurant's scallion pancakes as French toast fingers.

"They do whatever they like," she said.

The dishes tend to be Asian-style, although, Duval added, "We used to have one day we called international." In the Single Pebble world, that meant mac and cheese or Duval's pork casserole made with egg noodles and cream of mushroom soup, which she still occasionally makes.

'A good warm-up'

A few minutes before 4 p.m. Monday afternoon, one Single Pebble cook, Roy Gustafson, 30, was stirring up an "international" offering of blue cheese dressing for carrots sticks using cheese left over from a staff party. He was also steaming some imperfectly wrapped dumplings.

Working on the wok line, cooks Tim Cohen, 24, and Charles Clarke, 40, conjured about half a dozen dishes within what seemed like five minutes, including a beef stew, a chicken version of the restaurant's Buddha "beef" (normally made with seitan) and a vegetarian tofu dish.

Clarke, who's been with A Single Pebble since a few months before the Burlington location opened in 2002, also made the restaurant's Ma Po bean cake with spicy ground pork and tofu. "I like it a lot," he said. "I like to finesse the spices. It's just one of my favorites and it's a good warm-up."

The seasoned chef said he likes to run a dish like that before service to get in the groove. "You get

everything ready at your station," he said, "but until you really reach for everything, you don't know if it's there."

The row of steaming bowls grew. "We all ready?" Cohen asked Clarke before ringing a bell. Staff members came into the kitchen to fill their bowls from the huge rice steamer and then headed out to sit around the table, serving themselves family-style from the spinning Lazy Susan.

Megan Hoffmann, one of the restaurant's front-of-the-house managers, said that generally there is "no business" talk at the meal although she did touch base with the bartender about a malfunctioning soda gun. "Everyone kind of likes it as a reprieve," said Clarke, who ate quickly and headed back into the kitchen to finish prepping.

By 4:30 p.m., everyone from dishwasher to bartender was back at their stations and Hoffmann and a colleague were clearing away the family meal dishes.

A straggler employee arrived through the front door and quickly surveyed the leftovers. Gesturing to one empty dish, he asked, "What was on this plate?" Informed that it had been dumplings, he sighed, "Oh, bummer."

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