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@ home with Chef David Pedinotti

The Pedinottis on building their culinary empire

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The first morning David Pedinotti woke up in his new Saratoga Springs home, he knew things had to change. "I looked out the bedroom door straight into the kitchen. The first thing I saw was the stove," he says. "I see that all day at the restaurant, so that had to change. Fast."

That was last August. Today, a new spot for the stove is merely one of dozens of changes that have been made in the small yellow house located on a narrow, tree-lined residential street. Pedinotti, head chef and owner with his wife, Diane Desmond Pedinotti, of both One Caroline Street Bistro and The Mouzon House in Saratoga Springs, has put his carpentry skills to use once more, cutting a doorway here, creating cabinets and shelving there, moving rooms around.

All this came after the Pedinottis did what so many other Americans with grown families have done: downsize sort of. They sold their sprawling five-bedroom Galway home with its huge kitchen from which they operated a catering service to purchase a much smaller place within walking distance of their restaurants, then wound up remaking it to accommodate short-notice drop-ins by their four daughters, a son, a couple of spouses and assorted other guests.

David's disparate skills showed in a rustic French luncheon of duck confit/bean cassoulet, lamb chops and sweet potato tart he prepared in his redesigned kitchen before serving in the cozy sun porch he had converted into a long, narrow dining room. David, who always professed an interest in cooking and even studied briefly in Schenectady County Community College's culinary school, once made a solid living as a contractor and carpenter while Diane, like him a native of the area, was a corporate trainer for a realty company. That worked fine until the restaurant bug bit David, hard.

The opportunity was One Caroline Street, just off Broadway in downtown Saratoga. Now it is a popular bistro and nightspot. Thirteen years ago it was a dirt-floored hole. "I couldn't believe it when he took me there and showed it to me," Diane says. "When he told me he had signed a lease, I burst into tears." As usual, David's contracting skills came into play. A lot of blood, sweat and tears have turned One Caroline Street Bistro into a funky, stone-walled cellar punctuated by copper-topped tables, mood lighting and, on some nights, filled with the soft strains of contemporary live jazz and pop. "We started out just serving drinks and sandwiches and very light stuff," David says, "then a few other dishes. It kept growing from there and I really got into it."

"It" is David's passion for comfort foods plucked from various cuisines, dishes of the sort

learned in his Grandma Lucy's kitchen, modified to take into account his passion for some of the flavorful fire of the American South and a strong affinity for sustainable farm products. "I love foods with heat and flavor," he says, "but so much of the northern cuisine is an embarrassment - all heat and no taste." A lot of experimentation, cookbook studies and several visits to New Orleans for first-hand experiences with the famous restaurants helped advance his culinary efforts.

Meanwhile, Diane delved into the wine side of the operation, taking classes, reading the history of wines and wine regions, visiting wineries. Her efforts have paid off with a string of awards from the prestigious Wine Spectator magazine and a strong reputation for the lists at both establishments.

It didn't take long for One Caroline to catch on in the competitive Saratoga restaurant scene, eventually garnering a solid three-star Times Union rating. The next step was The Mouzon House, a paean both to the city's architectural heritage and to Southern culinary sensibilities. It, too, received three stars shortly after opening in the fall of 2005. The Pedinottis purchased the sole surviving brick house of what once was an imposing row of homes along High Rock Park, keeping the original owners' family name, Mouzon. The menu is replete with Southern regional dishes such as shrimp and sausage etoufee, crawfish beignets, pork rillettes on crostini, and duck cassoulet, with entrees available in half-size portions.

The artistic bent of the Pedinotti clan really came into play at The Mouzon House, with design coordination by Diane, a former painter, and David's structural handiwork leading the way. The compact dining rooms on two floors have a certain Southern richness to them, from the linens and lighting fixtures to the large, colorful paintings applied directly to the lath-and-plaster walls, work done by daughters Kaitlyn, Rebecca, Elizabeth and Sarah.

The same sort of feel permeates the Pedinottis' new home where soft jazz emanates from a sound system - "There's always music in my parents' home," observes daughter Sarah, a singer and songwriter who popped in to see what her dad was cooking up and stayed for lunch before heading off to rehearsal. Original photography, sketches and paintings by other daughters dot the numerous pale green and sunshine yellow walls and cubbyholes in the pleasing maze of rooms. The music is a shared love among the Pedinottis. Like so many chefs, David also is a musician "It must be a right-brain thing, I guess," he says. "Plus, it's a great stress outlet." He plays guitar and leads the house band at One Caroline on Tuesdays, while Sarah and her group appear on Mondays and Fridays, with others performers filling in on other nights.

As he whips up a simple salad of crisp romaine lettuce, imported Spanish wine vinegar and toasted pignoli nuts to go with a platter of crisp lavash wafers and tangy goat cheese, David holds forth on his love of local ingredients. "I like the idea of the availability we have these days of buying fresh, additive-free foods. They were tough to find just a few years ago, but things have really changed. We work with a series of farms that provide us with some really fine ingredients, and we're proud of that. That's why we put the names of the farms right on our menu."

That may be fine for commercial kitchens, but what about for the private home? "The fact that so many of the farmers and livestock suppliers have been expanding their products and their services because of the steady demand has really helped make more things available to everyone. Just look at some of the farmers' markets in the area," David says. Among his major farm suppliers are Sap Bush Hollow, 3 Corner Field, and Lewis & White Farm. Their products and others' continually inspire David and his chefs at both restaurants to create their own sausages, smoked bacons, pats, Grandma Lucy's meat-thickened rich tomato ragu, and a vegetarian pasta of the day featuring organic vegetables.

Will things settle down now for the Pedinottis? "Well, there's always a lot to do to keep pace in a competitive town like Saratoga," David says. "Even some of the longer-lived places have had some problems and there are a lot of strong newcomers. And we've kind of had this idea for a bakery " You can almost hear the clank of his toolbox competing with the rattle of pots and pans.