

DINING

The Clever Cooks excels as deli and caterer

BY ELEANOR HEALD
SPECIAL WRITER

"Do what you love and you'll love what you're doing" is the up-front message from The Clever Cooks, a New York-style storefront deli that opened in Birmingham in early January.

Business partners 33-year-old Ron Colasanti, 28-year-old Jason Melton and 23-year-old Arienne Simkus are The Clever Cooks, who also bill their operation as The Smart Food Company.

Wall art in this 20-seat eatery tells you who the models are. There's Ben Franklin, Albert Einstein, Isaac Newton, Thomas Edison, Aristotle, Plato, and Mona Lisa decked out in her chef's toque. On the menu, some of these folks even have clever specialty food items named after them.

All three partners worked for Hudson's in their food program. Mytic Gourmet inside the Bay Orange Warehouse on Greenfield north of 13 Mile was Colasanti's first entrepreneurial venture using talents sharply honed as a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y. He asked Melton and Simkus to join him as partners.

Colasanti admits he'd been looking at downtown Birmingham for a long time.

"A storefront deli concept is what I had in mind," he said. "I like the fast-paced energy of a bustling lunch trade, both at and take out, coupled with walk-by traffic. Start-up costs, converting Clara's Garden Cafe (a former storefront business at this location) to The Clever Cooks were minimal."

The Clever Cooks
Where: 225 E. Maple, Birmingham, (248) 644-9868. Fax (248) 644-9868.
Open: Monday-Saturday 11 a.m. to 7 p.m.

Menu: New York style upscale storefront deli, gourmet shop and catering.
Cost: \$2-\$5.50 for deli items.
Reservations: Not accepted.
Credit cards: All majors accepted.

Simkus is a 1998 Schoolcraft College Culinary grad. Melton's father's family was in the restaurant business and he says, "I've been around it all my life. I've worked my way up from the ground floor to Somerset Hudson's retail food manager. Each exposure made me like the business more."

While Colasanti and Melton credit Simkus with the sharpest pastry skills, talking about her famous three-hour quiche, she says, "I don't like to be strapped down to pastry. The fast pace of working with hot food is very appealing. Besides, Melton makes the best carrot cake and bar cookies. His monster cookies are awesome."

Committed to the downtown Birmingham community, The Clever Cooks make free daily deliveries to a downtown location without a minimum order. A delivery person is their only employee.

As caterers, they've been discovered by such corporate clients as Southfield's Crimmins, Forman Market Research, Henry Ford and Beaumont hospitals and Prudential Securities in Birmingham.

Betsy Merriman, Prudential's

branch manager's administrative assistant, gives The Clever Cooks high praise. "Their food is wonderful - very high quality and the freshest ingredients. We particularly like the specialty sandwich with smoked turkey, pastrami, bacon, tomato and smoked gouda on grilled basil focaccia with whole grain honey mustard mayo. It's very big and very good."

On the menu, this sandwich is \$5.50. Two others are top-sellers: The Ultimate Grilled Cheese Sandwich \$3.75 is described as the one-and-only ovenbaked ultimate grilled cheese sandwich loaded with three delicious cheeses: Swiss, cheddar and provolone on white bread, topped with Dijon cream cheese and finished with red onion and sliced pickles. The Turkey Roll \$6 includes turkey, romaine lettuce, dried cranberries, provolone, toasted pecan mayo, cranberry-apple chutney, wrapped in whole wheat lavash.

Merriman remarked about the Cream of Reuben soup by dubbing it "fabulous." Like all The Clever Cooks' made-from-scratch soups, including a daily-changing choice of four that may include smoked kidney bean



STAFF PHOTO BY JESSY KALININ

Clever: Jason Melton (left to right), Arienne Simkus and Ron Colasanti are The Clever Cooks who also bill their operation as The Smart Food Company.

chili, roasted garlic and butter-nut or sweet potato and crab, they are served with a wedge of double-baked bread. Or you can order a soupier clever bowl \$3.25 where freshly baked bread is carved out in the middle and filled with one of the fresh soup-of-the-day specials.

Number one crowd-pleasing salad is Michigan Salad, a great combo of flavors including seasoned boneless breast of chicken,

Michigan dried cherries, candied walnuts and red peppers tossed with Michigan cider vinaigrette.

"When we first opened, we didn't anticipate the call for vegetarian soups and sandwiches," Simkus said. "But we've responded with two vegetarian (vegan) soups daily and vegetarian salad. Also, our carry-out orders have been very brisk. It seems that Birmingham business people like to eat at their

desk."

Tables with umbrellas for outdoor eating will be available in warm weather. Then, soups will change to match the season.

If you phone during peak business hours, you may get frustrated by the busy signal. Try faxing or leave your message. One of The Clever Cooks will return your call. Right now, they're suffering the growing pains of success.

WHAT'S COOKING

SOUP'S ON!

New restaurant 207 S. Old Woodward, inside Lenestor Coffee Co., downtown Birmingham (248) 642-SOUP began serving on March 29.

In celebration of their grand opening, owners Jay Rosett and David Trepeck are donating all profits from the weekend of April 9-10 to Detroit's Capuchin Soup Kitchen.

Soup's On! features eight gourmet soups daily served in ounce, 12 ounce, 16 ounce and quart sizes. Six of the soups will rotate on a daily basis, and two popular mainstays will remain on the menu everyday. Customers will also be offered a wide variety of fresh-baked breads to accompany their soup selection.

CHOCOLATE DEMO PROGRAM

Presented by world-renowned Pastry Chef Ewald Nutter, Saturday and Sunday, April 10-11 at the Lark Restaurant. The class and lunch will begin at 10:45 a.m. and will end after dessert is served between 2:30 and 4 p.m. The cost is \$100 per person. Reservations are a must. Call (248) 344-2197.

STIR CRAZY CAFE

Chicago-based restaurant concept specializing in fresh pan-Asian cuisine will open its first Michigan restaurant Friday, April 16 at Great Lakes Crossing at Auburn Hills, Baldwin Road Exit off I-75 in the Great Lakes Walk section of the Mall near Entry No. 6.

The main attraction at Stir Crazy Cafe is a create-your-own stir-fry bar where guests can select from a wide variety of

meats, vegetables, noodles, and homemade Asian sauces and then interact with a wok chef to create their own stir-fry dish. The restaurant also features an extensive menu of fresh Asian inspired fare including crispy sesame calamari with wasabi cocktail sauce, wok seared tuna sashimi, sesame Caesar salad, kung pao noodles and Stir Crazy's wonton banana dessert. Menu prices will range from \$6.95 to \$9.95 for lunch and \$7.95 to \$13.95 for dinner. The restaurant will be open 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. Sunday-Thursday; 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. Saturday-Sunday. The restaurant will unofficially open April 9-15 with a series of test servings with the proceeds going to Habitat for Humanity of Oakland County and United Way of Oakland County. Following a

VIP Reception on April 13, the restaurant will officially open for business on April 16. For more information, call (248) 454-0400.

EINSTEIN BAGEL CORP.

Through April 15 offering EZ lunch for two for \$10.40. Includes bagel sandwich of your choice, chips and a regular drink. For the store nearest you, call 1-(800)-BAGELME or visit the Web site www.einsteinbros.com

FIVE LAKES GRILL

Cooking Demonstration with wine and food pairings at Five Lakes Grill, 424 N. Main, Milford, 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. Saturday, April 17. Cost \$110 per person all inclusive. Chef/proprietor Brian Polyn will conduct a formal two-hour cooking demonstration followed by the essen-

tials of food and wine pairing presented by General Manager/Sommelier Ron

Edwards. Call (248) 684-7455 for reservations/information.

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