

Florentine chef hits area spaghetti trail

By SUSAN LEINOFF

Giuliano Bugialli — a name that rolls off the tongue more times than a piece of spaghetti — was in Avon Township recently to conduct private cooking classes and give a public demonstration at Kitchen Glamor.

A brief encounter with the Florentine chef, culinary scholar and author of "The Fine Art of Italian Cooking" proved more of a treat than sampling the northern Italian dishes he prepared.

Dressed in his first pair of jeans and a powder blue monogrammed shirt, he looked very modern. But Bugialli conjures up a Renaissance man, stewed in tradition, yet boiling over with imagination and warmth.

Just three years ago, the 43-year-old bachelor abandoned a career as a language instructor and opened a cooking school in his adopted home of New York City. The motivating factor: Americans prefer learning about Italy's history, culture and customs through food rather than language.

His mother, who refers to him as the "worst cook in the world," was apprehensive. The concept of investing in cooking lessons — especially from Bugialli — was completely foreign to her.

Bugialli said she called him every day from Florence.

"Who's coming?" she asked. "How can you make a living without opening a restaurant?"

Mrs. Bugialli had nothing to worry about.

Three years later, her son's still earning a good living, his reputation has spread and he's gained an international following by gourmets.

His New York classes are booked through 1981. His other school in Florence, which he said was Italy's first when he started it "for fun" seven years ago, has grown from a one-week summer program into nine weeks of separate sessions.

Bugialli said he's happy and lucky, generally because he's doing what he likes. In part, that's reviving the traditional recipes of Tuscany, the region in tradition, yet boiling over with imagination and warmth.

"I will never invent a recipe," Bugialli told an audience of area cooks crowded into Kitchen Glamor's demonstration kitchen. "Why should I when there are so many still unknown, and we have so much to discover."

"I believe in authenticity," he said.

Bugialli said his research usually begins in homes of old, established Florentine families. He traces the origin of their recipes through original manuscripts and early books.

The technique has enabled him to prove some interesting facts, like fried potatoes were invented in Florence several hundred years ago — contrary to what the French would have you believe.

The other joy in Bugialli's work is the students he encounters.

"I love to meet new people," he said.

He estimated that 99 percent of the personalities involved in cooking share diverse interests. "They're not closed minded," he said. "They're professional people who happen to love food."

Students have traveled great distances — some from Australia and Japan — to attend his classes. Bugialli said it's best to forget national traditions and learn to cook in the Italian style.

Bugialli credits his grandmother as source of his own cooking methods, said simple dishes are the hardest to prepare because they rely on freshness and the right ingredients in the right amounts.

"Dishes topped with 14 sauces make you forget what you're eating," he said.

His favorite foods? Cookies and ice cream.

What he eats when he's depressed? Pasta.

Meanwhile, he's never eaten at McDonald's or tasted peanut butter. "I never cook for myself," he added.

Bugialli said when alone in New York "I go out for Chinese food."

Someone in the audience asked the former language teacher, who holds degrees from the universities of Rome and Florence, what his favorite Italian restaurants are in the United States.

"I don't understand the question," Bugialli replied, shrugging his shoulders and returning to whipping cream for the rich dessert of zabaione he was preparing.

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Giuliano Bugialli demonstrates his Italian cooking techniques at Kitchen Glamor in Avon Township. (Staff photo by David Frank)

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