

Local Legend

by Lisa Waterman Gray - Santé - November 2007

Customers at Jasper's restaurant in Kansas City, Missouri, recognize Chef-Owner Jasper Mirabile, Jr. as more than just the man responsible for their dinner. Many have attended one of his food seminars or cooking classes, and even more have heard him on local radio programs. The gregarious chef maintains a high profile and a nonstop schedule, whether he's inside his family's 53-year-old flagship restaurant or their adjoining Marco Polo's Italian Market, or outside on his never-ending culinary campaign trail.

"I love promoting my friends in the business, and I do a lot with local groups," says the junior Mirabile, a James Beard Award-winning chef. During one of his recent Saturday morning radio talk shows, held at a kitchen design showroom, the chef did a cooking demonstration for more than 50 people, interviewed guests and directed distribution of food samples. He participates in hundreds of charity events and offers cooking demonstrations at local markets. Moreover, he's written several cookbooks, squired Kansas City residents on culinary tours to Italy, and helped convene Slow Food Kansas City – a group that has grown from two members to 175 in four years.

Jasper relishes such social and culinary multitasking, but his greatest priority is always the restaurant he co-owns and operates, with his brother, Leonard. They grew up in the business, and Leonard's son, Jasper, III also works there full-time. Jasper's customers know each family member well because of one guiding principle: "MITH, which means 'Mirabile in the House,'" explains the chef. "There are always at least two of us in the restaurant at once."

The Mirabiles have been a familiar face in town ever since Jasper Sr. and his father, Leonardo, began the business with \$200 and family recipes for southern Italian fare. Although he was born in Kansas City and raised in New Jersey, Jasper, Sr.'s parents were born in Sicily. When opening the original Jasper's the first-generation Italian-American son took the cooking expertise he learned from his mother into the commercial kitchen.

Hire Ground

Loyal to each other and their enterprise, the Mirabile brothers also work to maintain a dedicated staff. Treating employees like family is one of their guiding principles, learned from their father. When the restaurants temporarily closed, for example, for 18 months before reopening in their current location, Jasper Sr. gave full pay to 14 staff members during the fallow period. "His employees respected him because he was always very straight with them. He really took care of his employees, and the practice continues with Leonard and me," says Jasper Jr.

Nonetheless, the brothers demand a standard of performance from their staff. On the job, excellence is expected from day one. New servers complete a three-week training boot camp, follow current servers through five lunches and five dinners, observe in the kitchen for one evening and take a written test about the menu and rules before they serve customers.

"This is not a democracy," Jasper Jr. notes. "We are still small enough where we deal with each employee on an individual basis through training and management. We have meetings here every Saturday about the lineup for the day, potential issues, and recent problems."

"They are very strict about how they want things done," says Lena Formella, who has been a server at Jasper's for four years, "but they're real supportive, too. I think they focus on the little things, not just the food order, that will help someone remember the place."

Several of the nine kitchen staff members have worked between 15 and 30 years at Jasper's, and everyone is cross-trained. "They knew my father, they know the recipes, and you never hear 'it's not my job,'" remarks Jasper Jr., who works the line on weekends. His nephew works it the remainder of the week. "There is a lot of joking and personal talking before mealtime, but no one talks during service hours."

The Mirabiles are very select about new kitchen staff. "It's hard to get into our kitchen," Jasper Jr. admits. "I won't hire somebody who's working at another local restaurant. When I do add a new cook, we hire within our company. We would never take a cook from another restaurant." Applying the Golden Rule, he adds, "We respect other restaurant owners and would not like anyone to take a cook from us." Jasper Jr. also won't hire a cook who has worked in many different restaurants over a short period. "All they want to do is put Jasper's on their resume. I want people who want to grow with us and make Jasper's their career."

Longtime Liaisons

Loyalty also extends to Jasper's suppliers. The Mirabiles have purchased produce from the same source for 45 years and dairy products and wild rice from another supplier for more than 40 years. They've ordered wine from one company for 40 years and from another for 17. They've worked with a local baker for a decade and with a local farmer for five years. Leonard's father-in-law supplies local pecans; Jasper Jr.'s father-in-law, who owns Mill Creek Meats, and Leonard's brother-in-law, who runs River City Meats, have shared equal orders from the Mirabiles for 25 years. "Suppliers price differently," Leonard states. "So I check everything when it comes in, and I'll call other providers for prices. I save a penny here and there, but it adds up." Although they're admittedly cost-conscious, Leonard notes, "We won't accept anything for free. We want to buy from who we want to buy from – not from someone we are obligated to."

For the Mirabiles, menu authenticity is also part of the business mission, from made-to-order polenta to house-made sausage. Five years ago, Jasper Jr. started using seasonal ingredients from local farmers whenever possible and purchasing eggs and milk from nearby sources. In addition to his menu of tried-and-true Italian favorites, "I do a seasonal supplementary menu," Jasper Jr. says. "For the fall, we have pumpkin ravioli, roasted duck, liver and onions and an apple torte. We also do a daily risotto and pasta special." The kitchen begins each day making fresh chicken and veal stock as well as tomato sauce. Most other food is cooked to order; the Mirabiles would rather be out of a menu item than serve something that isn't fresh.

When pricing the menu, the brothers are slow to pass on escalating costs to their customers. "We usually have a 25 percent markup on all items," Jasper says. "When we have a big increase in price, such as with cheese or dairy in the past few months, we absorb the costs. But we are now paying fuel charges to all delivery companies and the cost of pasta from Italy is increasing 25 to 35 percent due to wheat shortages in the United States and abroad." Jasper's concept has always been to keep menu prices affordable, endearing them to the locals; Spaghetti and Meatballs is \$10.95, Osso Buco sells for \$23.95 and Cioppino or Veal Marsala is listed at \$19.95.

Old-World Wine

Leonard Mirabile directs wine sales and generally marks up each bottle about two-and-a-half times cost. His inventory is 95 percent Italian imports. The remaining five percent comes from Italian-owned wineries in California, with a few French Champagnes added for special occasions. The owners are constantly looking for new wines. "When people come here they want to drink Italian wines," Leonard says. But he notes, "Chianti and Pinot Grigio are all that a lot of people know of Italian wines." To counter this and encourage experimentation, the house will offer customers three varieties of wine as 2-ounce pours. In addition, table tents announce wine specials that rotate every four to five weeks. Leonard is

on hand five nights a week to recommend bottles, taste with customers at the bar, and work with staff who have an ongoing education in wine. They taste new wine specials with a supplier each month and receive notes; tests are given periodically.

Listed by regions, the 350 Italian wines on hand comprise 70 percent of total bar beverage sales. Popular liquor drinks include grappa after dinner, anything with Limoncello, and Jasper's house-made Applecello, created with local apples.

Driven by Details

Whether it's counting sterling silver espresso spoons daily or scouring the marketplace for the best deals, the Mirabiles pay close attention to every detail of their business. "We still run the restaurant like my father did," Jasper Jr. says. "Our operating systems in the office are still the same ones my father had 53 years ago. We use a daily business journal and hand-write figures and sales. But we do use the computer for our 600 recipes, training manuals, and so on."

They also keep close watch on their equipment costs. Since Leonard's son began fixing most of the equipment, annual maintenance costs have dropped from \$25,000 to \$12,000 per year.

"Keeping after every little detail before it becomes a big one is important," Leonard says. "If the owners aren't there, who is going to see the little things?" Customers notice the details, which Leonard considers both a blessing and a curse. "You can feed some people for 20 years, everything being wonderful. One little incident – overcooked potatoes, one tough steak – and they will not be back for years. Thankfully, we have been here for years and have overcome many of these obstacles. Keeping an alert staff that also cares and watches the little things makes our job easier, but still, things happen, and that's why we are here every day, all day and night." Even so, Leonard adds, "it's not work if you love it, and we do."