

'Chef Polo' has 107 reasons to love his job

By Stacie Nichols

STAFF WRITER

snichols@greenvillenews.com

Chef's Profile

When patrons ask Chef Apolonio Mojarro, "Chef Polo," why he named his Greer restaurant Bistro 107, he has a ready answer.

"There are 107 seats, I work 107 hours and we're located at 107 South Main," he said.

Needless to say, Mojarro's learned to live without a lot of sleep.

But he's also learned not to skimp on passion and patience. "You have to have a passion for it," he said.

The culinary arts run deep in Mojarro's blood. His uncles retired as executive chefs in America before they returned to Mojarro's hometown of Zacatecas, Mexico, and opened a culinary arts school.

So Mojarro grew up around the sounds

of clanking pots and pans and the gourmet sights and scents of experts at work. He also grew up learning culinary terminology and techniques.

When he was 17, he came to the United States and put himself through culinary arts school in California. At 18, he got his first full-time job in a restaurant.

Then, with years of experience under his belt, Mojarro started his own roving chef business, working in country clubs around the country. He started in Chicago and two years later moved to New Jersey. Two years after that, he was on to Texas and then to Florida.

Cooking in country clubs demanded knowledge of all types of food, from gourmet to barbecue, Italian to French. So it prepared Mojarro to take a position as

executive chef at Ta-boo, a fine-dining bistro in Palm Beach, Fla.

"A bistro is something where you can get away with anything," Mojarro said. At Ta-boo, he wasn't limited by classifications. It wasn't a steak restaurant and didn't major in French or Italian cuisine. It was both, simply and elegantly, a bistro.

Mojarro spent 14 years at Ta-boo, during which time the restaurant gained a national reputation, he said.

But he eventually had the itch to branch out on his own. He knew he couldn't open a restaurant in Florida because of real estate costs. So he and his wife, Debra, whom he had met in a Florida country club, began looking at South

INSIDE

■ Read a Q&A with "Chef Polo", Page 2D



Family tradition: Apolonio Mojarro grew up around the culinary arts.

See **MOJARRO** on page 2D

STAFF

MOJARRO

FROM PAGE 1D

Carolina.

They settled on Greer because it was a growing city between two larger cities and the cost to own your own building was cheaper than leasing one in Florida, Mojarro said.

The couple opened Bistro 107 in February 2005. In it, Mojarro created a restaurant that was very similar to Ta-boo.

He wanted to offer his patrons five-star dining quality with big portions for the price of a chain restaurant. Mojarro knew that keeping the bistro theme would allow him the flexibility to change the menu to suit the tastes of his customers.

At first, he put Moroccan dishes on the menu, along with some French and Southwest cuisine.

"There was not enough Southern food," he said, adding that he has learned a lot from commen-

cards in the two years Bistro 107 has been open.

He quickly exchanged dishes like chicken cocovan and lamb tagine with a hearty American hamburger and a dish no Southern restaurant can do without, shrimp and grits.

Of course, he also has an audience for high-end dishes such as foie gras, and maple leaf duck breast, he said.

And, even though he's made a few changes to the menu, Mojarro said his patrons in the Upstate are far easier to please than his patrons in Florida.

Despite working long hours, Mojarro loves what he does.

"I just enjoy cooking," he said.

Still, every chef needs a bit of a break from the kitchen. Fortunately, when he does get a few hours off on the weekends, his son, Sebastian, 12, and daughter, Alexa, 14, cook for him and his wife.

The two are following closely in their parents' footsteps and spend their fair share of time at

the restaurant when they're not in school.

Sometimes the two siblings serenade the guests. Sebastian plays the guitar and Alexa plays the piano.

The man who was named 2001 Chef of the Year in Florida and 2007 Best Chef of the Upstate by Carolina Magazine knows the importance of a good sense of humor as well. Mojarro doesn't even consider retirement a distant possibility. In fact, he's contemplating opening another restaurant identical to Bistro 107 in Greenville, he said.

But he has no plans to ever leave Greer.

"There are a lot of wonderful people here," he said. "I love my neighbors. I'm grateful to be here and am looking forward to what's ahead."

Bistro 107—107 S. Main Street in Greer—is open for lunch from 11:30 a.m.-2:30 p.m. weekdays. Dinner is from 5:30-9:30 p.m. Mondays-Thursdays and 5:30-10 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays. Call 879-1107.

Q&A with Chef Apolonio Mojarro

By Stacie Nichols

STAFF WRITER

snichols@greenvillenews.com

Chef Apolonio Mojarro's wife, Debra, happened to be his boss at a country club in Florida when they first met. Now, although she no longer dictates his weekly schedule, she gives him his lifetime schedule, Mojarro said. Luckily, she allows him to spend plenty of time pursuing his passion in the kitchen at his restaurant Bistro 107 in Greer.

Do you have any hobbies besides cooking?

"We traveled a lot before," Mojarro said. "I haven't taken a day off in almost three years."

What is your favorite food?

Hot peppers. "I love hot peppers. I have two big bags of them at home."

What is your least favor-

ite food?

Turkey. Mojarro said that because of his work in country clubs he cooked about 36 30-pound turkeys every year for 14 years.

"I still smell it. I've cooked enough turkey for the rest of my life," he said. Still, he plans to offer turkey on the menu at Bistro 107 this Thanksgiving.

What is the most exotic food you have ever worked with?

"There's a lot of stuff." The list includes rattlesnake, alligator and rabbit.

Have you acquired any interesting dining stories over the years?

One time, Mojarro served a woman a creme brulee, he said.

After she had begun eating the dessert, she called him to the table, disgusted, and told him that someone in the kitchen had put cigarette ashes in

her food. As it turned out, what she thought were ashes were actually vanilla bean shavings.

"I had to bring vanilla bean to the table and shave it and show it to her," Mojarro said.

Another woman had ordered scalloped potatoes. When Mojarro walked by her table she was pulling at the neck of her blouse and gasping for air. When he asked what was the matter, the woman said the waiter had not informed her that there was seafood in the potatoes and that she was highly allergic to seafood.

Mojarro kindly explained to the woman that scalloped potatoes actually contain no seafood and that "scalloped" was just a term for how the potatoes were prepared.

Now he tries to provide a detailed list of ingredients for each dish on his menu.