

Cooking Together

THE STORY BEHIND THE GLOSSY MAGAZINE PHOTOS.

Laura Muzzi Brennan

IN HONOR OF VALENTINE'S DAY, GLOSSY COOKING magazines feature couples engaged in a flawless kitchen waltz. One peels, the other dices. One whisks, the other adds broth in a steady stream. Neither complains "you added too much salt!" and both prefer their filet medium rare. Their kitchen is roomy, light-filled, nary a dirty dish in sight.

The story behind the scenes is messier and infinitely more interesting. When the featured couple is a married pair of successful chef-restaurateurs from different continents, it's a foodie love story worth its weight in truffles.

Francis and Nui Pascal met nearly a decade ago. He is chef-owner of **Birchrunville Store Café**, a French-Italian BYOB tucked away in the Chester Springs countryside. The Café garnered effusive praise from Craig LaBan and consistently tops "Best of" lists. Nui's Thai L'Elephant in Phoenixville boasts rave reviews and a loyal following—including Francis who, after sampling Nui's cuisine, made her restaurant his go-to for Thai. The couple married in March 2015. Last February, they embarked on a joint venture: **ButterScotch Pastry Shop** across the road from the Café.

Nui manages the front of this cozy breakfast and light lunch spot. She refers to herself as "the smiling person" while Francis and his long-time pastry chef, Jane Urban, prepare the food daily in the Café kitchen. Butterscotch cake, peanut butter tart and banoffee pie (dessert pie made from bananas, cream and toffee) are immensely popular. Other favorites: milk chocolate banana croque monsieur, pecan sticky buns, croissants, lobster salad and quiche.

When I ask Francis and Nui about cooking together, they exchange



Francis and Nui Pascal

looks and laugh. "We're both used to controlling things," Nui says and tells me about the time Francis poked her spring rolls and told her they were too loose. Now their typical MO is to divide and conquer: she cooks one dish from start to finish, and he does another.

Nui is a typical Thai cook, creating dishes where each distinct flavor is preserved whereas Francis, who trained in classic French cuisine, focuses on blending flavors to create new tastes. Nui's dishes involve only one pan. Francis uses every pot within reach. (For the record, he happily does dishes.)

While they usually cook separately, the couple influences each other's menus. Francis incorporates fish sauce into sauces and accompanies his lobster bisque with lobster and corn shoot summer rolls. Nui sometimes substitutes heavy cream for coconut milk in her tom yum soup. Her shrimp and scallops with champagne sauce and shrimp in paradise (shrimp stuffed with crab in a panang curry cream sauce) bear Francis's mark. For New Year's Eve, Francis made lobster bisque with curry for Thai L'Elephant.

When they eat at home, they keep the food simple. Nui adores Francis's Bolognese ... which she spices up with chili pepper. In summer, they enjoy grilled whole fish with ginger and pepper, wrapped into lettuce leaves. ("Nui has to have lettuce," Francis says smiling.) And they love unwinding over a glass of wine—"a 6- or 7-year-old California Cabernet sauvignon," says Francis—and triple crème cheese, Nui's favorite.

Francis and Nui Pascal's relationship is part cultural exchange, part business partnership and all love—richer than any glossy magazine can convey.



Seafood Vol au Vent with a Touch of Thailand

With a wink and a nod to wife Nui, Chef Francis Pascal introduces staples of Thai cuisine—coconut milk and curry paste—into this classic French dish. If you're adventurous, says Chef Pascal, make your own puff pastry. Otherwise, frozen, store bought sheets of puff pastry work just fine.

For the puff pastry:



Puff pastry sheets (enough for 8, 4" circles)

1 egg mixed with a splash of water for egg wash

For the seafood filling:

1 lb. fresh lobster

½ lb. shrimp

4 diver sea scallops

8 large or 12 medium-sized mussels

½ C. white wine

1 tsp. canola oil

1 tsp. butter

½ C. celery, diced

½ C. carrots, diced

1 onion, diced

1 tsp. red Thai curry paste

1 tsp. cornstarch

½, 13.5-oz. can coconut milk

Salt and pepper to taste

To make puff pastry:

Preheat oven to 400°. Cut eight 4" circles from the puff pastry sheets. Place first 4 puff pastry circles on an ungreased baking sheet 2 inches apart. Brush with egg wash. Stack the remaining 4 puff pastry circles on top and brush again with egg wash. Refrigerate uncovered for 30 minutes. Bake for about 20 minutes or until golden.

To make seafood filling:

Cook lobster in a large pot of boiling salted water for 1 minute. Save 5 oz. of the cooking water. Transfer the lobster to an ice bath. Clean the lobster.

Peel and clean the shrimp. Clean scallops by removing the muscle. Wash and dry. Clean the mussels by scrubbing and removing the beard.

In a stock pot, bring mussels and white wine to a boil. Cover and cook for 5 minutes. Save 2 oz. of the wine. Remove mussels from the shell and set aside.

Heat canola oil in a nonstick saute pan on medium heat, add

Delicious Reads

This Valentine's Day, when you want a peek into the intertwined food and love stories of other couples, pick up one (or all!) of these books.

Cooking for Mr. Latte: A Food Lover's Courtship, with recipes by Amanda Hesser

Before Amanda Hesser co-founded Food 52, she was a feature writer and food editor at *The New York Times*. In her charming, funny book, she recounts the meals (and food fights) she shared with Mr. Latte from their first date—when he commits the faux pas of ordering a latte after dinner—to their wedding feast.

Lunch in Paris: A Love Story with Recipes and Picnic in Provence: A Memoir with Recipes by Elizabeth Bard

Elizabeth Bard was starting a master's in art history when she fell in love with a Frenchman and his cuisine. *Lunch in Paris* details their early relationship in all its delicious cross-cultural glory. *Picnic in Provence* picks up as they embark on the adventure of becoming parents, moving to the countryside and opening an artisanal ice cream shop.

Downtime: Deliciousness at Home by Nadine Levy Redzepi

Released in late 2017, *Downtime* answers the question "What do famous chefs eat at home ... when someone else is cooking?" That someone else is Nadine Levy Redzepi who cooks every day for her three young daughters, mother and husband Rene Redzepi, owner of Copenhagen's Michelin-starred Noma and one of the world's most influential chefs. Rene's foreword and Nadine's essay, "A Life in the Home Kitchen," bookend the recipes with insight into the couple's views on food and family.

shrimp and salt and saute until they are pink and firm. Let shrimp cool and cut into pieces.

In the same pan used to cook the shrimp, add butter, celery, carrots and onions and cook until the onions are translucent. Add red Thai curry paste and stir. Add corn starch and mix. Add 5 oz. of reserved lobster cooking water and the 2 oz. of reserved wine from mussels, bring to a boil and cook for 1 minute.

Add coconut milk, salt and pepper to taste, scallops, shrimp, lobster and mussels. Cook for 5 minutes.

Once the seafood mixture is cooked, immediately fill the puff pastry and serve.

Makes 4 servings.

Tarte Tatin

Francis and Nui Pascal both love this simple dessert.

4 apples, Granny Smith or Pink Lady

200 g sugar (about 1 C.)

Pinch of salt

130 g butter (about ½ C.)

1 sheet puff pastry, cut into 4 pieces to fit tart pans

Preheat oven to 375°.

Peel apples and cut into quarters.

In a sauce pan, make caramel by heating sugar over



medium heat until light brown. Add salt and butter. Whisk until homogenous. Divide caramel evenly into four non-stick tart pans.

Cover with all of the apples and top with puff pastry.

Bake until puff pastry is crisp and brown, about 20 minutes.

Remove from oven. Let rest for 1 minute; flip tart onto plate being careful not to burn yourself on the hot caramel. Serve with ice cream.

Makes 4 servings.



Bill's Chili

Often when I say I'll make vegetarian chili for dinner, my husband Bill, an avowed carnivore, volunteers to make this rib-sticking, meat lovers bonanza. He puts just enough vegetables in it to keep me happy, uses turkey because our younger daughter never eats pork and rarely beef, and liberally adds Old Bay seasoning, a staple of his cooking. My only role is to stir the pot every so often. Even better, he shops for all the ingredients and makes enough for a couple of dinners! Win-win in the kitchen.

6 Tb. vegetable oil
3 C. chopped onion

2 lbs. ground turkey
1 lb. uncooked sweet Italian turkey sausage, casings removed
3, 1.25-oz. packages chili seasoning
3 C. red peppers or a mix of red and green, diced
3, 6-oz. cans tomato paste
4, 7-oz. cans mushrooms (pieces and stems), drained
2-3 Tb. Old Bay seasoning
Accompaniments: Sour cream, shredded cheddar or Monterey Jack, scallions



Heat the vegetable oil over medium high heat. Add onions, ground turkey and turkey sausage. Stirring frequently, cook until meat begins to brown. Reduce heat to medium.

Add chili seasoning, red peppers and tomato paste. Keep stirring and cook for another few minutes. Reduce heat to low.

Add mushrooms and Old Bay. Let cook for a half hour or more, stirring occasionally.

The chili can sit on the stove all afternoon.

Makes 12-16 servings.

Egg Salad and Smoked Salmon on Pumpnickel Party Bread

Over the winter holidays, my husband and I went to a party where the host made Deb Perelman's smoky deviled eggs with marcona almonds and crisped jamon. Like everything Deb makes—I like to think we are on a first-name basis—they were fabulous and inspired me, along with my husband's love of capers and smoked salmon, to make this spread just a few days later.





6 hard boiled eggs, peeled
 2-3 Tb. mayonnaise
 1-2 tsp. Dijon mustard, more to taste
 1/4 tsp. smoked sweet paprika (hot is fine),
 more to taste
 3 Tb. capers, drained
 1 Tb. minced shallots
 Salt and pepper to taste
 Juice of 1/2 lemon

1/2 loaf party pumpernickel or crackers of
 your choice
 12 oz. smoked salmon*
 *I use Foppen's Norwegian Smoked Salmon
 slices from Costco, which come in 3 vari-
 eties (dill, traditional and pepper).

Peel eggs and press through a potato ricer
 for a fine texture or mash with a fork for

a chunky texture. Add mayonnaise, Dijon
 mustard, smoked paprika, capers and shallots.
 Taste and add salt, pepper and lemon juice.

Serve with pumpernickel party bread and
 thin slices of smoked salmon.

Makes 6-8 appetizer servings. ♦

*Laura traces her love of all things culinary
 to the first time she leafed through her mother's
 Betty Crocker's Cooky Book—which still occu-
 pies a place of honor among her 600+ cook-
 books. A passionate supporter of local food, she
 co-founded a farmers market, judges area food
 contests, and anticipates restaurant openings with
 the excitement most people reserve for winning a
 Mega Millions jackpot.*



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