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Salsa in the family

No contest: Brothers got busy bottling

BY KATHERINE CALOS
TIMES-DISPATCH STAFF WRITER

Don't tell your friends, if you want them to remain impressed by your new found culinary skills, but cooking doesn't have to be that hard.

Take a little marinade, take a little salsa and, before you know it, you have a dish that tastes as if you slaved in the kitchen. Except you didn't.

It's the idea behind Gunther's Gourmet, a line of marinades and salsas developed by

two Virginia brothers.

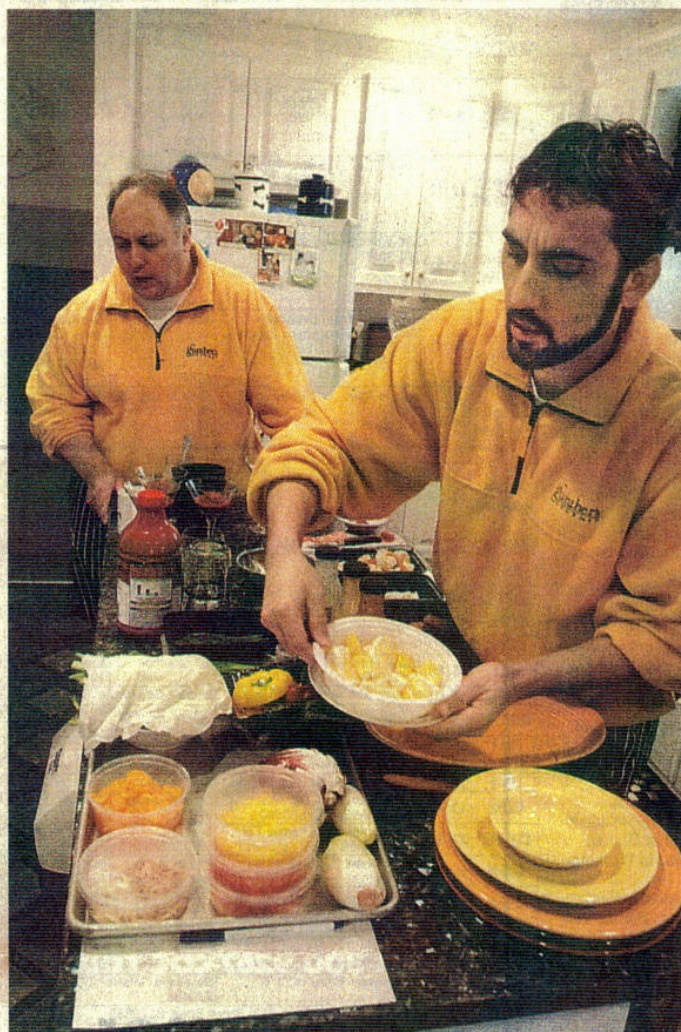
Michael Lampros is a Richmond chef who developed a recipe he liked for an Orange Balsamic Vinaigrette & Marinade. Nick Lampros, his brother, lives in Roanoke and is a lawyer who reads the fine print.

"I said, 'I'm going to enter this in a contest,'" Mike Lampros recalled. "He said, 'You should just bottle it yourself.'" If he'd entered it in the contest, the lawyer discovered in the fine print, the recipe would have become the property of the sponsor. So, in 1999, the brothers entered the world of business. A year and a half later, they had a company with one product to sell.

Mike Lampros named it Gunther's Gourmet because Gunther is his dog and it had a nice ring to it. A portion of the profits goes to the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals.

Now in the third year since he went full time with the company, Gunther's has a line of three marinades/vinaigrettes and seven salsas. He ships 800 to 1,000 cases a month. The line can be found in a variety of stores in about a dozen states, including Virginia, North Carolina, Maryland, Ohio and, most

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DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

Michael (front) and Nick Lampros spice up a lunch menu with their Gunther's Gourmet products. At left, the last of a jar of Black and White Bean Salsa tops a quesadilla.





DON LONG/TIMES-DISPATCH

Vinaigrettes enliven a spinach or tomato-feta salad, are a dip for asparagus spears and add flavor to chicken. Salsa is good for chips and quesadillas, and it also makes an interesting seafood cocktail.

Gunther's

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recently, the Pacific Northwest. Any one of the products can transform an ordinary dish into something special.

"Cooking is fun," said the lawyer brother. "This is making it easy to deal with. Watching the cooking shows is fun, but who has time to do the ingredients?"

Mike Lampros made it look incredibly easy when he prepared several dishes for lunch recently. Of course, that would be expected for a chef who trained at the Culinary Institute of America and had a high-pressure apprenticeship in California under restaurateur Michael Chiarello, now of Food Network fame. Back here, where he'd graduated from the University of Richmond, he worked as a chef at the Country Club of Virginia and as executive chef in private dining rooms for Richmond corporations.

On the day they invited us over for a lunch demo, the brothers had just returned from a family event in Roanoke, so their only available prep time was that morning.

Before we arrived, Mike Lampros had marinated two chicken breasts in Roasted Garlic & Sun-dried Tomato Vinaigrette & Marinade and also prepared a tomato and feta salad, both of which

Gunther's Gourmet

■ **Vinaigrettes and marinades:** Orange Balsamic, Roasted Garlic & Sun-dried Tomato, and Lemon Oregano.

■ **Salsas:** Lime Mango, Peach, Crab, Black and White Bean, Salsa Fresca, Salsa Verde, and Spicy Chipotle Pepper & Smoked Corn.

■ **Available:** Selected Ukrop's, specialty shops such as Belle Kuisine, Complete Gourmet, Ellwood Thompson's, Good Foods Groceries, Nick's Produce, River City Cellars and Stonewall Market.

■ **Cost:** Order online at \$3.75 for vegetarian salsas, \$4.50 for vinaigrettes and \$5.25 for crab salsa, plus shipping. Store prices are similar.

■ **Details:** www.gunthersgourmet.com

salsa comes in varieties such as Lime Mango, Spicy Chipotle Pepper and Smoked Corn, Crab, Peach, Black and White Bean, Salsa Fresca (traditional) and Salsa Verde (with a surprise touch of spearmint).

Orders are taken at Mike Lampros' home near Parham Road in western Henrico. That's also where he develops his recipes in 10-pound batches. Once he has something he likes, he sends the recipe to his bottling plant in Maryland, where the batches are 800 to 1,200 pounds.

"I go up there the first four or five times they make it, to make sure it's the way I like it, and after that it's a formula," he said. The

regional distributor is Wythe-Will in Toano.

Mike Lampros describes the difference in his salsas as freshness and flavor. They're also low in sodium and fat-free.

"They're great for just about any diet," he said. "They're just vegetables mixed and seasoned well. . . . I never used anything that I can't pronounce when I cooked in the kitchen, and it's not in here."

They're not intended for the guy who wants to see steam come out of his ears when he takes a bite, though the "spicy" one does have a kick. They're more subtle.

"It smells restaurant fresh," he said. "They're more distinctive flavors. Our fruited salsas are more tropical." As the man in charge, he can decide not to make a particular variety at a particular time if he doesn't think the ingredients are up to par. He was out of salsa verde, for example, on the day of our visit, though stores may have a few jars from previous orders.

"Tomatillos are not good quality right now," he said. "I'd rather be out of it than produce something I'm not proud of."

After Nick Lampros helped get the business rolling, he initially backed out. It's gotten so busy, though, that he's rejoined the team to keep the growth on a steady roll.

"It's gone from one flavor in the back of my car to 10 pallets," said Mike Lampros. "It's exciting."

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After we arrived, he made seafood cocktails by filling the bottom of martini glasses with crab salsa and topping it with already-cooked scallops, shrimp and squid. A Bloody Mary gained extra body and pizzazz from a dollop of his crab salsa. Asparagus spears were ready for dipping in the three vinaigrettes served in orange and yellow pepper shells. A salad of spinach, tomatoes, peppers, mandarin oranges and slivered almonds got a drizzle of Orange Balsamic Vinaigrette & Marinade.

Quickly he dipped the marinated chicken breasts in bread crumbs and popped them one at a time in a minifryer for about three minutes, taking them out slightly before they were done so they could finish cooking in a 375° oven.

Another easy dish: quesadillas. Take one flour tortilla; top half of it with grated cheese, bean salsa and slices of chicken; fold it over into a half-moon; and heat until both sides are lightly browned and the cheese has melted.

Simple.

But also sophisticated when the



Gunther