

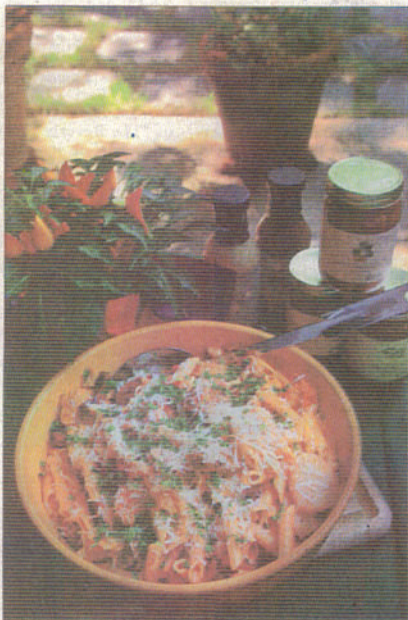


BY THE WAY

J.R.R. Tolkien's "The Hobbit" was first published on this day in 1937.



Photos by STEPHANIE KLEIN-DAVIS | The Roanoke Times
 Chef Mike Lampros serves up his breakfast burrito with Gunther's Black & White Bean Salsa and Gunther's Gourmet Salsa Fresca at the Roanoke home of his brother and business partner, Nick Lampros.



Chef Mike Lampros' Seafood Pasta with Gunther's Gourmet Crab Salsa. The recipe is on Page 4.

Gunther's gone gourmet

A chef, his dog and their new line of salsas, marinades and vinaigrettes

By Beth Macy
 beth.macy@roanoke.com
 981-3435

Roanoke native Mike Lampros was doing the corporate chef thing in Richmond, cooking anywhere from 10 to 250 meals a day for corporate muckety-mucks, banking execs and boards of directors.

But whenever the Culinary Institute of America-certified executive chef tried to get creative with his menus, the businessmen were less than enthusiastic. They wanted a porterhouse steak and

baked potato. Or a simple turkey sandwich. Even whole-grain mustard was out because, they complained, it got stuck in their teeth.

Lampros, 39, is a classic chef, with knife scars on every finger and a nervous energy that's quelled only by being in the presence of four burners going at the same time.

To oil his culinary imagination, he taught cooking classes and developed recipes on the side. He was planning to enter one such concoction in a national recipe contest when his big brother,

Roanoke lawyer Nick Lampros, read the fine print and offered a better idea:

Instead of giving away the rights to your orange-balsamic vinaigrette marinade recipe, Nick suggested, why not produce and bottle it instead?

That idea, hatched four years ago, has resulted in a company with a burgeoning distributorship — Lampros' creations are sold in more than a dozen states and counting — and a new career for its founder. The condiment-producing

GUNTHER: In its fifth year, it's still an all-family operation



"He's been with me longer than any woman," says Mike Lampros of his 8-year-old boxer, Gunther.

FROM PAGE 1

operation is expected to bottle and sell 40,000 units this year.

It hasn't hurt, the brothers concede, that salsa has overtaken ketchup as the No. 1-selling condiment.

Featured in this month's Southern Living magazine, Gunther's Gourmet now sells 10 different vinaigrettes, marinades and salsas, including their best-selling crab salsa — a creation Mike made up on the spot at a foods trade show.

Brother Nick handles the paperwork while their parents, retired orthodontist Leo Lampros and Barbara Lampros, help with deliveries. "We joke that Dad went to medical school so he can deliver salsa for me now," Mike says.

"Of course if he complains, all I have to do is threaten to move back in with them."

Gunther — that's Mike's 8-year-old boxer, the company namesake — provides moral support. (Gunther's donates a portion of profits to the Richmond SPCA.)

"He's been with me longer than any woman," jokes Mike, a bachelor. "So I figure I'll put his name on the bottle. He's not leaving me."

"And if he does, he's not taking half of what I own."

The Lampros inherited the gene for cooking. For decades, their immigrant grandfather ran a Greek diner in Gainsboro called Nick's Place, and their father and uncles started out as dishwashers and short-order cooks in the restaurant business, too, with most of their kids following suit.

Gunther's lemon oregano vinaigrette and marinade is Mike's nod to the Greek food he grew up eating. The salsa fresco — a plain variety, basically — was created after his mother asked him, "Can't you just make something normal?"

The brothers market the products to the upscale busy professional, the person who's too busy to cook from scratch at the end of a long workday but doesn't mind throwing together several premade ingredients.

The Gunther's Web site lists a plethora of recipes that feature their products, and Mike routinely holds cooking demonstrations at the grocery stores and gourmet shops where his food is sold.

"If you can make it elegant, simple and flavorful, people are willing to cook," Nick says. "People like to cook at home. They just don't know what to do."

"Cooking shows are great, but who's going to buy truffle oil for \$65 for one dish?"



Nick Lampros, a Roanoke lawyer, handles the paperwork part of the gourmet condiment enterprise he shares with his brother, Mike.

Mike puts a twist on the standby Bloody Mary by replacing half the mix with Gunther's crab salsa, tucking a slice of lemon dipped in Old Bay on the side of the glass. He dresses up a breakfast burrito by adding his black and white bean salsa.

Next on the brothers' business plan: creating a dessert sauce and a "heat booster" condiment made from chiles.

An all-family operation, Gunther's is still small enough for Mike to drive 300 miles a day to deliver a few cases of the salsa. "Sometimes it's just, 'Here's your salsa. Bye.' But if Gunther's with me, I can usually nab a free lunch or soda."

"When Gunther's with me, everyone wants to talk."

By the way, their rule on the "Seinfeld"-ian concept of "double-dipping": The same chip can be dipped into a communal salsa bowl more than once — but only among family and close friends.

For more recipes and a listing of area stores where Gunther's is available, go to gunthersgourmet.com.

"If you can make it elegant, simple and flavorful, people are willing to cook."

Nick Lampros
Roanoke lawyer
and businessman