

food & drink

GRUB

You can't help but be a little envious of Mike Lampros: Salsa is his life. He whips the stuff up in huge batches — Black and White Bean, Blue Crab, Lime Mango and Spicy Chipotle among them — then scores bags of corn chips and goes on sampling binges ... all while the rest of us dream of salsa. He's got it in his fridge, in his cabinets, stocked in warehouses. He's killed entire jars of it with a spoon while he was watching football games. The man has salsa to waste.

I caught up with Lampros one evening at his house in the West End, which also serves as the official headquarters of Gunther's Gourmet, Lampros' burgeoning salsa and marinade business. There, he lives something of a bachelor's dream life, bopping around in tattered sweats, doting on his beloved dog and waxing poetic about the bite and heat and smoky ethers emanating from the various ingredients of his concoctions.

Lampros got his start as a chef, first as a young nub kicking around the kitchens of his youth, then, after a stint at the University of Richmond, a couple of years at the Culinary Institute of America, and an externship out West in a Napa Valley bistro.

It was as a chef at the Reynolds Corp. where Lampros' clientele — generally company execs — could not get enough of his Orange Balsamic marinade. He considered entering it in a contest, but was otherwise deterred by his brother, who advised him that by virtue of his entry, the recipe would become public domain.

As you might imagine, Lampros' brother is a lawyer, so Lampros heeded the advice and began bottling the stuff instead. That was four years ago, and since then, Lampros has introduced additional marinades (Lemon Oregano, Roasted Garlic and Sundried Tomato) before hitting the salsas — hard.

"Salsa is the number one condiment in the country," Lampros pronounces, a stat that oddly downplays the uniqueness and quality of his own line. In his first year he unloaded 6,000 units; in the first two months of 2003 he's seen 10,000 fly out the door. It's getting to where he can't do it all himself.

To bear the load, Lampros employs a number of family members: his semiretired parents back in his hometown of Roanoke, who do delivery runs in the area; his sister in Blacksburg, running errands in her off hours; and his brother, the lawyer, helps on the business end. As a tribute of sorts, he's encoded each of their birthdays into the bar codes of his growing line of products.

Perhaps his most significant employee, however, is Lampros' dog, Gunther, for whom the entire brand is named. Gunther is a high-

high, pug-nosed boxer who approaches visitors in a curious, aloof sort of way. He's become a fixture on Mike's expanding delivery circuit. "When I go out," Lampros says, "my customers ask, 'Is Gunther here?' They love to go out and play with him. If he's not, I'm just the salsa delivery guy." Which

is not a problem for a guy who's right at home in the kitchen, dreaming up the next wild thing to put on a chip.

Gunther's Gourmet products can be found at specialty groceries throughout Virginia and Maryland.

Mike Lampros lives the bachelor's dream life. At home with his dog and company namesake, Gunther, Lampros spends considerable time dreaming up the next wild thing to put on a chip.

Man, Dog and Salsa

by Dave McCormack

STIMON TELLOUS

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