

Chef Henry fulfills his dream, one dish at a time

Have you ever wanted something so badly you'd do just about anything to get it? Henry Gonzalez has. And it landed him in a fainted heap in a storeroom at 9 years old, but it also gave him the career he dreamt of as a kid.

"Chef Henry," now the executive chef and owner of Spaggi's Restaurant in Upland, began as a young boy washing dishes in a restaurant where his father worked—a job he begged for at age 9. Eagerly, young Henry began picking up tricks of the trade, including knife skills that he learned the hard way.

"My dad had threatened me, 'If you cut yourself again, you're not working here,'" Chef Henry recalled.

With this in mind, little Henry hid after his next bloodshed.

"When I came-to with the smelling salts, my dad asked me, 'Why didn't you tell me?'"

"You said if I cut myself again, I couldn't work here," the aspiring young chef responded. "He finally understood how badly I wanted this."

So, with a few rules—going to church, getting good grades in school—Chef Henry worked in that kitchen until he was 16, embracing the culinary education offered by his colleagues who taught him everything they knew.



Chef Henry Gonzales' Champagne shrimp salad with mandarin oranges.

"I was so young, I wasn't a threat," he explained.

Setting out in the world, 16-year-old Chef Henry began working at Rosa's Restaurant in Baldwin Park where his hotshot kitchen reputation grew. Casting the image of his colleagues painstakingly peeling garlic cloves, Chef Henry recalled surprising them with his novel methods.

"Here's this kid who puts the garlic bulbs in a towel and pounds it with a mallet," he said.

This "kid" soon became executive chef at the Ontario location of Rosa's, donning the uniform he coveted when worn by his father.

"There he was, dressed in a white chef's coat and a

chef's hat, and people had so much respect for him. I admired him so much," he said, remembering his childhood.

Without a high school education but already working as a head chef, he was invited to be a "fellowship chef" at the Los Angeles Culinary Institute where he learned formal terms for the techniques he had already mastered.

Thriving at Rosa's for a number of years, Chef Henry left the restaurant in 1992 feeling like "I had my whole life ahead of me." A succession of other kitchens followed: a coffee shop, a steak house and the prestigious Melvyn's Restaurant in Palm Springs where presidents and celebrities such as Gerald Ford, Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin dined.

"Sure there were times when I was a little above the ground, but somehow you always have to stay grounded," he said.

Chef Henry's next career move brought him to Claremont where he elevated the reputation of Wolfe's Market kitchen and endeared himself to the community. Through his customers, he gained a deeper understanding of his talent as a means of service and inspiration.

"It was an opportunity to walk in every day and make a difference," he said. "Sometimes people aren't having a good day, and by making the right food, you can change their day. And I don't take that

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Chef Henry Gonzales began working in a restaurant at the age of 9 dreaming of becoming a chef. Today he is the owner and executive chef of Spaggi's Restaurant in Upland.

COURIER photos/Gabriel Fenoy



Spaggi's Restaurant on Foothill Boulevard in Upland also offers cooking classes and catering.

lightly. This is not a job, it's not even a career, it's a calling. It's my way of doing what God wants me to do. I'm a servant."

After 7 years at Wolfe's, Chef Henry stumbled upon the chance to fulfill his childhood dream. "I'm going to own my own restaurant someday," he had said at age 9.

In 2002, he became co-owner and executive chef at Spaggi's. Earlier this year, he assumed full ownership, running the establishment with his wife of 11 years, Ana Gonzalez.

Claremonters enamored with Chef Henry's fine cuisine and warm personality now trek eastward on Foothill Boulevard to find their beloved chef.

Clientele at Spaggi's rarely dine without a quick chat or lengthy conversation with Chef Henry who frequently emerges from the kitchen to meet his guests. Taking pride in presenting the highest quality ingredients in the highest state of perfection possible, Chef Henry also believes that life beyond food at Spaggi's is equally and infinitely important.

"It's the service, it's the friendly smile, it's believing that everyone who comes through the door is just as special as everyone else," he said. "I want Spaggi's to be a place where, at any given time, a guest would feel welcome and have a wonderful experience."

Though Chef Henry capably manifests an exceptional "beyond food" atmosphere at his romantic bistro, homage must be paid to the food itself: Italian cuisine served with an artist's flair.

One might start with baby new potatoes hollowed and filled with asiago cheese and chives and then baked until golden brown. This may be followed by filet mignon topped with spinach and gorgonzola cheese in a brandy and rosemary demi glaze. Or lobster-filled ravioli with ricotta cheese and garlic in a Champagne lemon cream sauce.

"Hopefully, when a person receives it, when they view the dish with their eyes, it's already stimulating their taste buds and making their stomach jump for joy," Chef Henry said.

For the fulfillment of his dream and for each step and experience along the way, Chef Henry is thankful for the people in his life, from those who took a chance on him to those who have enjoyed his cooking.

"It takes people. You can't do anything for yourself. You just can't," he said.

And in that spirit, Chef Henry strives to be of service to others, directing much of his time and talent—



Chef Henry Gonzales prepares a lunch salad at his restaurant in Upland. COURIER photos/Gabriel Fenoy



Spaggi's Restaurant on Foothill Boulevard in Upland features an outdoor dining area.

and food—toward doing good in the world. He and his staff donate catering services to art openings at Claremont's First Street Gallery, a nonprofit that gives professional art training and exhibition resources for adults with disabilities.

"This certainly provides a financial benefit, but

more than that, it brings a higher level of celebration for our artists," said gallery manager Seth Pringle who met Chef Henry as a Spaggi's patron.

"I really believe God is doing what he wants with us," said Chef Henry. "We're helping the right people...and I try to send different staff each time so they, too, can be touched."

Mr. Pringle explained that what is most noteworthy about Spaggi's generous help is "the humble manner in which they give these services."

"[Chef Henry's] attitude doesn't make it seem like he's providing charity to us, it's more of a partnership where different community organizations team up and it makes the community stronger," said Mr. Pringle.

"Pay it forward," said Chef Henry.

Spaggi's, which offers cooking classes and catering, is open for lunch and dinner and is located at 1651 W. Foothill Blvd., Upland. For a complete list of services and lunch and dinner menus, visit www.spaggis.com. Information, reservations: 579-0497.

—Brenda Bolinger