

Local chefs dish on dream dinners for mom and the vegetable joys of spring

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AJP Executive Editor

Asparagus! As Mother's Day approaches, local chefs and restaurateurs are turning their thoughts to burgeoning spring produce — and time spent in the kitchen with their mothers and grandmothers.

"I'm excited to cook with artichokes, asparagus and peas," says Tyler Fenton, chef/co-owner at Reilly Craft Pizza & Drink. "My favorite method of cooking is over a live fire, and these three spring ingredients are insanely good when fire roasted. They need very little else to make them special."

Most chefs will be busy in their restaurant kitchens on Mother's Day — it's the most popular day to dine out — but it is fun to imagine what they'd whip up just for mom.

Fenton says that instead of cooking for his mother on Mother's Day, they'd make something together, since she loves to learn new dishes. They'd keep it light, perhaps a simple pasta dish with spring vegetables. He recalls spending time with his mother's large Italian family, where

pasta dinners brought everyone together. "I think those dinners planted in me a love of food from a young age, which has grown into a career."

Chef Massimo Tenino says it was his grandmother who "taught me the importance of using good quality ingredients, and how good food brings people and families together."

Tenino also gives vegetables the wood-fire treatment, making the Verdure Miste, a vegetable assortment, one of the most popular dishes at his Tavolino Ristorante Italiano. "I am also excited to use fresh peaches, wood-fired, and homemade vanilla gelato, simple and delicious," he says.

For his mother, "for sure I would make fresh pasta, heart-shaped ravioli filled with ricotta and spinach. Fresh pasta has always been part of special occasions in my life, and it takes love and time to make good ravioli pasta."

Claire Johnson of Claire's Café and Art Gallery would make the wonderful matzah ball soup she learned at her mother's knee.

"I come from a family of kosher scratch cooks," she says, recalling one uncle who had a kosher butcher and fish market on

Chicago's Devon Avenue, while another ran a Romanian vegetable shop on Ashland Avenue. Her mother and grandmother baked challah every Friday. "Everything was fresh, made from scratch — we carry that tradition forward in my restaurant," says Johnson, who uses fresh organic vegetables in all her cooking.

Sigret Thompson, chef/co-owner at The Tasteful Kitchen, says her homage to her mother would be the chickpea crepes currently on the restaurant menu, served with a cauliflower Hollandaise sauce and fresh asparagus. "My mom would make crepes for me when I was a kid," she says.

The Tasteful Kitchen's theme is "modern vegetarian cuisine for everyone," and Thompson delights in the locally grown ingredients available in springtime, including fennel, leeks, turnips, beets and spring onions. A 10-course tasting dinner on April 30 will feature these and other seasonal vegetables, she says.

Susan Fulton of Gourmet Girls Gluten Free Bakery/Bistro is grateful that her mother encouraged her to take over the planning and cooking of family meals at a young age. "She was always open to my experiments!"

This spring, Fulton is energized by the fresh organically grown ingredients available from farmer's markets. "There's always something new and exciting to try," she says.

Gus Gerson, chef/owner of Gusto Osteria, is planning to cook for his mother-in-law on Mother's Day. "We will enjoy some grilled items such as asparagus, potatoes, perhaps a steak."

Gerson remembers helping his grandmother cook. "As far as I can remember back until the time she passed away, my grandma was always baking and preparing amazing things in her kitchen. She would let me help, but we had to learn how things were done the right way. From the beginning, cleanliness and organization were instilled; these are important factors in my restaurant today."

Sunny Holliday, chef/owner of Lovin' Spoonfuls, says her mother liked quiche, so she'd prepare a spinach-mushroom quiche with a fresh fruit salad and oven-roasted potatoes.

Holliday's mother loved to cook — "I inherited that gene," she says — but she wanted her daughter to become a doctor.

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