

# Cooking: science or art?

## “That's a different soup!”

“Basically it starts out, what do you want to eat next week?” Sarah Deigl describes the creative process of designing the weekly menu at Real Food. “Like literally, what does Paul, Brian and Sarah want for lunch next week?”

First, they look in the fridge to see what needs to be eaten up. Then they knock ideas around, pairing a soup to a salad, a sandwich to a soup. “I’ll get it made on Thursday or Friday, or I’ll come in on Saturday and finish it up,” says Brian Whiteside of his prep work. Brian is an experienced pastry chef himself and graduate of NECI. He just showed up on the Real Food doorstep one day and more or less refused to leave.

Paul scrapes a platter of roasted onions into a pot for one of next week’s soups. This weekend he won’t get much time off because he has a luncheon for 40 to cater on Sunday. “I try to get a day off every few weeks. It’d be nice to have one day off per week, but...” He lets the sentence dangle because making real food is time consuming.

Sarah remembers in the beginning asking, “Are people going to want to eat this kind of food, or are we going to have to dumb it down.” They chose to stick to their guns: nothing permanent on the menu; no standard fare, no chicken salad sandwich unless Paul wants to make one, which he does every now and then. They remember their first menu featured a Vietnamese sandwich called a Banh Mi with all kinds of pickled veggies and jalapenos and stuff, “the best sandwich ever,” sighs Sarah dreamily. “The second day somebody came in and ordered seven of them,” chortles Paul.

If it sounds like they make these dishes up as they go along; they do. “Yes,” confirms Paul without a moment’s hesitation. “That’s it. Absolutely...It’s very haphazard.” In fact, are you ready for this, he keeps most of his recipes in his head!

Occasionally he will refer to the ‘Old’ and ‘New Testaments’ of what they call the ‘Bible,’ two notebooks full of stained, spotted, and dog-eared handwritten recipes that Sarah has collected over the years. These are the tried and true, the ones that, “work so well and are so perfect that I just want to keep them in one place.” Once Paul made a notation in the ‘Bible.’ “And we had a fight,” snaps Sarah. “I was like, ‘You don’t write in the Bible. I’m the only one who does that.’” She purses her lips. “So now he asks permission.”

Could the ‘Bible’ be a cookbook in the offing? “No,” she says definitively. Paul tried to start a ‘Bible’ of his own, “but it’s too much trouble to keep up with.” And yes, she confirms, “He makes everything up. He never uses a recipe, almost.”

This remarkable news flies deliciously into the face of the new ultimate cookbook, “Modernist Cuisine: The Art and Science of Cooking,” by Nathan Myhrvold. It just came out. At \$650, this six-volume set, totaling 2,438 pages and weighing 43 pounds, leaves nothing to the imagination in the kitchen.

Whatever happened to the art of real food? “There’s a lot of backlash now to that molecular gastronomy. People are saying it’s soul-less,” confirms Sarah. “But,” hastily cautions Paul, “if you know those basics, you make far fewer mistakes when you are being creative. Cooking, part of it is intuitive, but part of it is science...and you have to know a little bit about that.”

Developing a sense for cooking happens “by eating a lot, reading a lot,” says Sarah, who devours *Cooks Illustrated* cover to cover every month. “And practicing. Yeah experimenting,” fills in Paul. “And things that are in season at the same time have a natural affinity for each other, and bringing in all the things that make a good dish, which is sweet and salty, crunchy and soft,” follows up Sarah. She points to one of the salads on today’s menu. Blood oranges, goat cheese, and pistachios are variably sweet, salty, crunchy and soft. “It’s just a process like that. Balance is the key to successful cooking.”

Take pastries for example. “You need texture, you need temperature and you need balance in the flavor. Your apple pie; you want your warm apple pie with your

cold ice cream. You want your crisp crust and your soft apples. You want your tart apple flavor with earthy cinnamon. All those things in balance, in harmony with each other, that’s what makes a great dish.”

“And sandwiches can be just like that,” points out Paul.

Any tips for making that perfect flakey light pie crust? “Honestly? The key is vodka,” bomb-drops Sarah. Vodka??? “You use vodka in place of part of the water; ice cold vodka instead of ice cold water.” She explains the alcohol prevents gluten from forming. Gluten makes bread chewy. Vodka “allows you to put more moisture into the crust making it more pliable and easier to roll out and deal with...In pastry, you want as little gluten as possible...Vodka pie crust?” she snaps her fingers and grins a game-winner, “It’s sweet.”

Here’s another tip. “When he says ‘taste this,’ the first two things we always say are ‘salt and acid.’ And acid could mean it needs a little vinegar, it needs a little lemon juice.” For home cooks, “that’s one of the

biggest leaps: seasoning and learning acidity. You don’t want it to taste sour, but getting the right amount of salt and the right amount of acidity just opens up the whole.”

Today, Paul is making “a very rich, smooth” roasted onion, cheese, cream and garlic soup. The last thing he will do is add “a few drops of some vinegar.” He thinks back to when he was teaching a cooking class and he had everyone try an un-doctored soup. “And everyone would try the soup. Then I would add the few drops of vinegar, mix it in, and we’d all taste again. And they would just go, ‘Wow, that’s a different soup.’”



On a Friday, Paul Deigl is already working on next week’s roasted onion, cheese, cream, and garlic soup. Soups are Paul’s specialty.



It’s only three of them: Paul and Sarah Deigl with Brian Whiteside in the window. Parking and seating is cramped. They aren’t listed in the phone book. They don’t take credit cards, and their sign is a painted bed sheet. That’s the way they like it.

## “Lightning in a Bottle”

The name came to them one night when Sarah and Paul Deigl came home drop-dead tired from work. All they could muster was take-out. “Paul would say, ‘do you want pizza?’”

“And I’d say, ‘No.’” The ‘no’ trails off forlornly.

“Chinese?”

“No.”

“Mexican?”

“No,” sighed Sarah, exhausted and exasperated.

“I just want some real food.”

Not that pizza, Chinese or Mexican are fake food; anything but. But she just wanted something simple... and comforting ...and healthy... and, for that matter, interesting. You know...*real food*.

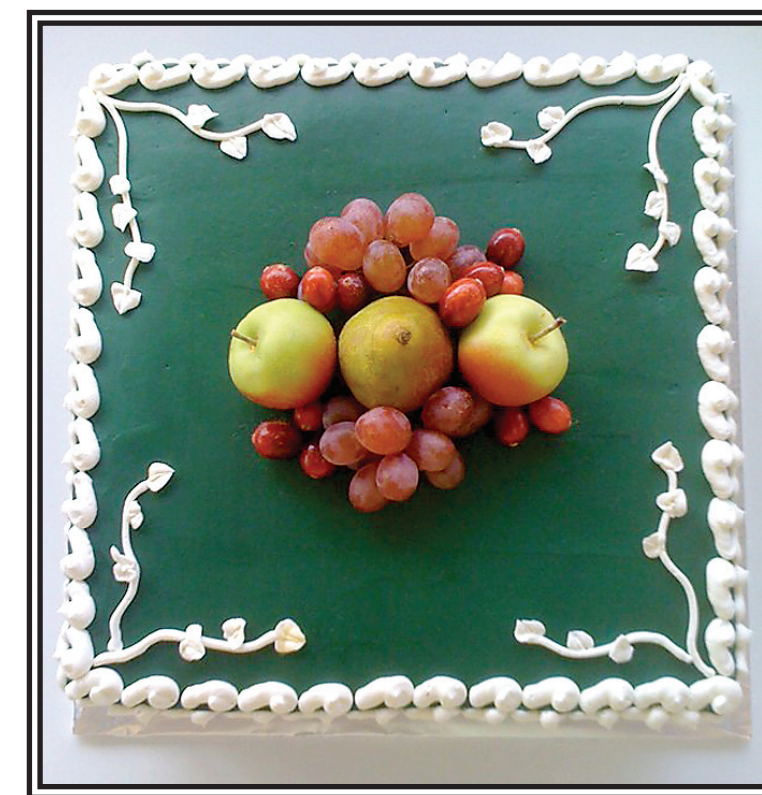


PHOTO FROM THE REAL FOOD WEBSITE: WWW.REALFOODVA.COM In addition to the lunch stand and catering business, Real Food is also a custom bakery, producing one-of-a-kind cakes.

"Like what I would cook for myself, but I was too tired to make. Fresh, healthy, homemade, not fried," she elaborates. "What we're doing was what I was wishing for."

She refers to their tiny lunch counter and catering kitchen on Rt. 15 south of town. "It's interesting what people expect when they come in. People will say, 'real food,' what do you mean by that?' And sometimes people are expecting down home, soul food, I think."

But Real Food is something decidedly different. Although it is located where the Lunch Box Grill used to be, a place that three years ago won the "Best Bacon Cheeseburger in Orange County" award (see *Insider* July 10, 2008), today, you can't get a hamburger, award winning or otherwise, here. But...on occasion you will find what chef Paul Deigl claims is, "the best lentil burger in Orange County." His sidekick, Brian Whiteside rolls his eyes. "It's the only lentil burger in Orange County." Paul grins like a kid caught with his hand in the cookie jar.

Actually, don't knock a lentil burger until you've tried it. It is a delicious veggie option to a hamburger, vastly superior to the usual (shudder) soy substitute. If you can't quite make that stretch, how about a bison flank steak, charred onion, Dijon, and arugula sandwich on Ciabatta bread instead? Or a blood orange, pistachio, goat cheese and greens salad with a blood orange vinaigrette? Or a Thai green curry and beef soup? That's what was on the menu a couple of weeks ago. Monday, it'll be different because the menu changes completely every week. You could eat lunch here five days a week for months and never have the same real food twice.



Brian Whiteside prepares a bison flank steak, charred onion, Dijon, and arugula sandwich as Sarah Deigl looks on. The menu at Real Food changes completely every week.

Sarah listens to her customers. "Sometimes they'll leave and say, 'You know, you're right. That is real food,' she muses. "I don't know exactly what lightning in a bottle we've got here, but it's great."

Real Food is further defined by what it is not. Located on an odd little triangle of land past which the Rt. 15 traffic fairly whizzes, it is not a traditional restaurant by any means. It's too small. "By permit we can only have 12 seats," says Sarah, proudly pointing to her dining room suit of one dozen chairs and four tables she found at D and J Thrift Shop.

Parking is cramped, nigh unto impossible for full-size vehicles and dually pick-up trucks. Their phone number is not listed in the directory nor is it available from Information. They're not in the Yellow Pages, and they don't take credit cards. They're only open from 11 a.m. - 2 p.m. Mondays through Fridays, and they don't advertise. Their sign, draped over a 12-foot long rustic wooden bench, is essentially a hand-painted bed sheet. About the only marketing tool they have is their barebones web site and blog, which, by the way, is refreshingly devoid of pop-up clutter.

They don't have legions of staff; it's just the three of them: Sarah, Paul and Brian. And, "we have zero debt." When vendors deliver, the Real Food folks write a check on the spot, spurning offered credit. "The thing I really love about this, and sometimes we have to remind ourselves of it, is that we are the owners of this business and we can do whatever we want," says Sarah defiantly. So, if Paul doesn't want to make chicken salad, he's not going to. "We're trying really hard to stay true to what we want to be and at the same time be really embracing to what

the community wants us to be."

Real Food is actually three enterprises: the publicly visible lunch spot, a catering company that operates out of the commercial kitchen in back, and Sarah's custom baking operation. The Real Food philosophy applies to all three branches.

For Sarah, getting into the food and beverage business started when she would bake cakes for her high school friends. She remembers half joking to herself, "I don't want to go to college, I should just go to culinary school." And in fact, after a brief stint at Virginia, "The University and I mutually decided to part ways." That naturally led to "what everybody who doesn't have any marketable skills does, which is get a job in a restaurant."

For her it was Hot Cakes in Charlottesville, "and I showed up every day and was reasonably competent, which is not always the case with summer workers. And by the end of the summer they needed a baker, and so they said, 'Do you want to become a baker,' and I said, 'Sure.' It was total on-the-job-training."

Meanwhile, Paul was undergoing a similar experience. Abandoning the idea of getting his masters from JMU, he had moved to Charlottesville and found work making sandwiches at a local restaurant. From there, he moved up the ladder to line cook to manager. One day he was thumbing through some cooking school brochures when Sarah peered over his shoulder and said, "Hey, maybe I should go to culinary school."

Thanks to what she gratefully refers to as "very supportive" parents, Sarah attended the New England Culinary Institute (NECI) in tiny Montpelier, Vermont. "Everything you do in the school is to be consumed by real world patrons, which I really liked. I liked the idea of hands-on learning."

Later she served internships in this area with Craig



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Hartman at Clifton Inn and again at Hot Cakes, while Paul worked for two high-end restaurants in Charlottesville before settling in at Hot Cakes himself. Eventually, Paul and Sarah wound up working different shifts at Meander Plantation; he doing the dinners, she the pastries and breakfasts. "After two years, it just got to be more work, more work, back and forth, later hours, an hour and a half in the car every day," grumbles Paul. "And we had a young child at that point, and we wanted to buy a house," chimes in Sarah.

They moved back to her hometown, Orange. Paul started a personal chef service, cooking everything from cozy suppers for two to dinner parties for 50 in his clients' kitchens. And so Real Food was born.

When the Lunch Box Grill space became available, they saw it as a way to expand the catering business, not open a restaurant. And even making that decision was tough. "We're very slow movers," says Paul laconically. "The commitment is just too much. I don't want to be locked into a lease," he remembers protesting. "She browbeat me into doing it," he asides.

The sandwich shop idea sprouted in September 2009, when a favorite lunch spot on the other side of town closed for good. "And there was no place else I wanted to go," grouses Sarah. She turned to Paul and said, "We need to open for lunch." She had always joked, "I'm going to make pies, sell pies through a window."

Later, they were approached to establish a sit-down restaurant at 110 East Main, where the Light Well is today. It was their dream come true. But, to their credit, Sarah and Paul felt that their kids, Rhew and Avery should come first. "We realized very suddenly that we were not ready for that kind of additional commitment of time. That was the biggest thing. We have these two little kids who already are starting to feel like 'why can't

you come be the chaperone on my field trip. How come everybody else's parent is there and you guys aren't?'"

It was a tough decision. "The worst day of my professional life was the day that we had to tell Dan (Gregg) and David (Perdue) that we were backing out, and they were incredible businessmen and gentlemen about the whole situation, for which I will be forever grateful," says Sarah reverently.

"I felt like a real jerk for awhile," says Paul, "but right now the kids are at an age where we cannot do anything else big. I like them too much. Everybody keeps saying before you know it, you're going to turn around and be shipping them off to college, and I absolutely do not want to miss what leads up to that."

Besides if they had become a full-service restaurant, they would have lost control. "It's me and Paul and Brian, and we all get along really well," says Sarah. "And if we get bigger we have to find more people...And staying this small allows us the obsessive level of control that we both actually crave, which is we have our hand in every bit of food that goes out the door. And the totally unexpected part about this is how much fun we're having meeting all the customers." Like the line in the 'Cheers' song, "Where every-bo-dy knows your name," the folks at Real Food recognize just about everyone who walks through the door.

Take Jim and Shirley Webster for example. They come in here at least three times a week, after they work out in a local gym. "I'll tell ya, the food makes you feel good afterwards," says Jim. Sarah points out that although they don't exclusively serve organic or local-

grown food, "We do as much locally as makes sense, which means if it is available and we can afford to use it."

Another good thing is that after so many years working different shifts, Paul and Sarah are now working together. "It's great," says Sarah unhesitatingly. "I love it," echoes Paul. Married 13 years, they spar good-naturedly. "Can you believe it, I stuck with her," he jokes. "I stuck with you!" she counters. Her mother, Page Sullenberger, just rolls her eyes.

Asked if Paul is, as many chefs are, an egocentric tantrum-throwing ogre in the kitchen, Sarah calmly responds, "He is the least chef-like chef temperamentally of any you will meet. He is incredibly easy going." She adds, however, "occasionally," he can be somewhat particular.

"Occasionally???" scoffs steady-eddy Brian in mock surprise.

In his own defense, Paul says, "I...I...If I want something cut a certain way, that's how I want it cut, and that's the way it should be cut." Everybody nods. Paul is also a stickler for cleanliness. "I'm too messy for him," shrugs Sarah, "which drives him crazy." Everybody nods again.

It's Friday afternoon. "There's nothing left," announces Paul. "There's no blood orange salad, there's no bison, there's no lentils." He pulls down the menu and starts cleaning the place up. "Wow, this has never happened before. We have run out of everything," exclaims Sarah delightedly.

Real Food will be back Monday, fully stocked with a completely new menu, as it does every week: three new soups, three new salads, five new sandwiches... but every morsel of it, real food.



Sarah Deigl refers to her collection of tried and true recipes, known fondly at "The Bible."