

Randy Cooper looks up to the ceiling, closes his eyes and rattles off the weekend's menu by heart: "braised veal shanks, filet mignon, Rag Mountain trout (a steady favorite), jumbo sea scallops, "scallops that have not been treated with any poly tri-phosphate preservative crap; they're so fresh you can eat them as sashimi; you could eat them raw."

Appetizers: combread and oyster-stuffed quail, sweet potato bisque with Croftburn Farm sausage. What about that incredible special a couple of weeks ago, Veal Napoleon? Ask Randy Cooper for a recipe and he'll say enigmatically, "They're not recipes; they're methods."

Okay, here we go with a Veal Napoleon method. "Napoleon" means it's stacked. He takes two pounded-thin veal medallions, dredges them in seasoned flour, and fries them in butter and oil, "a minute tops because they're so thin."

So, Randy, what's the trick to cooking well?

"Salt, butter and cream."

He puts one medallion down on the plate and then starts stacking; first with mashed potatoes with truffle oil and truffle peelings already mixed in. Next comes sautéed spinach in garlic, followed by shitake mushrooms, followed by the second piece of veal. Then, he sprinkles Everona Blue Ridge cheese on top of that, "pop it in the oven to melt that cheese, and some red wine sauce on top of it...and then we hit it with a little bit of truffle oil on top." Oh man, that is so good!

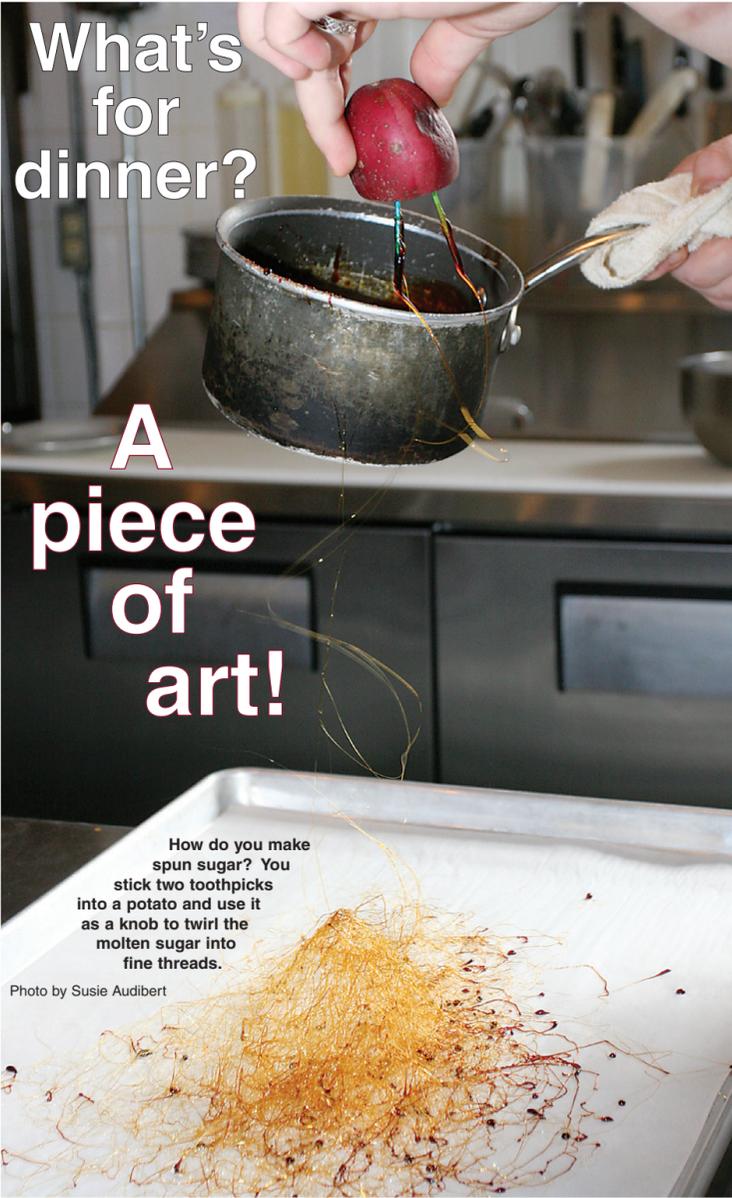
Of course any chef will tell you that it all starts with ingredients. A dedicated "localvore" (your food comes from around here, not China), Randy supplements his restaurant with pickings from his own vegetable and herb gardens. Also, note that he uses Everona cheeses (see January 24 *Insider*) which came all the way from Unionville, and, when he can, he uses Croftburn Farms, Retreat, and Higginbotham Beef products...all local.

Okay, time to make a red wine reduction sauce. But, sorry, this is not something you can do in half an hour.

Stock: No, it does not come out of a can; you have to make it from scratch. Randy starts with 25 pounds of roasted veal bones, garlic, shallots, celery, onions, carrots, reduced red wine and water "and just bring it up to a boil and let it simmer as long as you can until the collagens and flavors are extracted from the bones. You take that and reduce it." The reduced red wine that goes into the stock comes from two bottles of "inexpensive but drinkable wine, and reduce that to about a cup, and throw that in there." About 12-14 hours later, you get maybe two gallons of veal stock. "You don't want it to boil," cautions Randy of the

What's for dinner?

A piece of art!



How do you make spun sugar? You stick two toothpicks into a potato and use it as a knob to twirl the molten sugar into fine threads.

Photo by Susie Audibert

reduction process; if it does, the sauce becomes greasy. Instead, you simmer and skim off impurities. "Throughout the whole process of making a veal stock or a red wine sauce, you're skimming, you're straining, you're skimming, you're straining."

Now it's time for the red wine reduction. In another pot, combine aromatics such as garlic, onions, shallots, bay leaf, peppercorns, herb stems, and "sweat that down until you've extracted the moisture." To that he adds tomato paste. Stir all that around, add more red wine, and "reduce that until it is almost dry." At this point, a cup of reduced wine and aromatics has the consistency of syrup and the veal stock jiggles like Jell-O. Combine the two and "reduce it again." So, the next time you see "red wine reduction," on a menu, consider that if they made it from scratch, they started it yesterday!

So, Randy, what's the trick to cooking well? "Salt, butter and cream," he answers without a moment's hesitation, calling them "transporters of flavor, moistening, visual texture, mouth texture and the end product is the satiation in the stomach." By the way, Randy only uses Kosher salt ("it has a better mouth pop"). One exception: he uses sea salt for saltwater fish.

Salt, butter, cream; bad for your health, bad for your waist line. Just don't use so much, counters Randy, adding with a grin, "I don't care about your waist." If you had to hang a label on what they do here at Elmwood at Sparks, it's called Contemporary American Cuisine. "Americans want a lot of protein, a lot of starch, a little bit of vegetable and maybe some sauce," continues Randy. "I'll cut down on the protein portion size a little bit. Most proteins are seven ounces, which is more than enough."

He continues. "A lot of people think they are stuffed; that's a good meal. I don't think that whatsoever. Part of the meal is leaving satiated, comfortably full. You've had lots of flavors going on in your mouth. I'll try and balance it out."

For lunch, Elmwood at Sparks has a standard menu of interesting sandwiches, soups and salads, plus a couple of nice specials, such as the chicken and basil pesto penne the other day for less than \$10. Then, they close the doors at 3:00 to ready the place for dinner. Cloth napkins replace paper, "but I don't want it to be over-the-top formal. People come in, have good service, good wine, good food and a good experience."

Randy is looking for someone to write a review. Okay, here goes.

The food is great; the service friendly, efficient and professional, and the wine list is impressive. Another element of a gourmet restaurant experience is the décor. Randy has already replaced the silverware and chairs to reflect a more modern feel. And four inches were added onto the table surfaces so diners sense they are in a restaurant not a coffee house.

And so, finding no fault with the food whatsoever, let's turn to the wall décor: dozens of black-framed menus from all over the place that Randy's friends have collected for him during their travels. The effect is a haphazard collection of black rectangles. They're impossible to read unless you happen to be sitting right next to one. But even that is pointless because that's oh so NOT what you're having for dinner tonight.

In the hallway leading back to the restrooms is an outstanding collection of artistic photographs by John Bice of Rhoadesville. Trade places please. Lose the menus on the wall and hang the photographs in a neat line at eye level in the restaurant. Illuminate them with track lighting from the ceiling.

But maybe the idea behind the menus on the wall is to show that the art here is not up on the wall; it's on your plate.



Photo by Susie Audibert

Although their doors won't open for lunch until 11 a.m., the staff has been readying the Main Street, Orange restaurant since 8:30. On weekends, they'll work straight through till 10:00 or 11:00 at night.

Randy Cooper and



Photo by Susie Audibert

Chef Randy Cooper of Elmwood at Sparks readily admits that he thrives on stress. Under his guidance, the restaurant, which opened its doors almost exactly two years ago, is still growing and changing.

It's 9:30 on a recent Friday morning and the aroma of a red wine reduction sauce sidles up to you at the door, crooks its finger and says "Come with me." It's still two and a half hours 'til lunchtime at Orange's gourmet restaurant, Elmwood at Sparks and already visions of tender veal medallions drizzled with this same sauce are dancing up your nostrils and into your head.

Chef Randy Cooper and his three right hands have already been here an hour. The red wine reduction sauce won't be pressed into service for another nine hours when dinner will be served. And Randy probably

won't make it home before 11:30 tonight. Tomorrow, Saturday, he'll do exactly the same thing. And then he's allowed to rest on Sunday.

Well... maybe he can play with his six-year-old daughter for a few minutes because it's back to the restaurant to make brunch, and then there's a hunt breakfast to cater. And, on this particular Sunday night he's joining three other gourmet chefs to prepare the Boys and Girls Club benefit banquet at Palladio.

Okay, Monday...he'll take Monday off. Nope. It's back to making lunch. In fact these days Elmwood at Sparks is a seven-day-a-week operation: lunch Monday through Saturday, dinner Friday and Saturday night, and brunch on Sundays. And Randy wants to do more!

“that Constant Drive”



Photo by Susie Audibert

Standing by the walk-in cooler, Jon Lang takes a brief break in his long and busy day. "He's been with me since day one, even before day one," says Chef Randy Cooper appreciatively.

This guy is intense. He points to his cranium, nods and agrees, "Yeah, it's a scary place." The midnight blue pupils of his eyes bore through you from sky blue irises. You might think he's on drugs.

Well, he is actually. Randy Cooper is a self-admitted stress junkie. "It's a nasty nasty addiction...if you've got a screwed up personality like I do, you enjoy that kind of stress." He's serious. What he hates most of all is a slow day at the restaurant. He gets antsy, bored. "Come on, CHALLENGE ME," he screams silently. He draws his finger along the edge of the table, round the corner and up the other side. "When you've got tickets this long and going up this way, that's when you're cranking and having fun."

Sounds like the fast track to burnout. "I hope not," he ponders reflectively. He points to the aforementioned three right hands: Jon Lang, Sergio Perkins and Laura Thoreson. "Those guys are picking up for me. They're doing a killer job in the kitchen and I am very happy with them. Front of the house, we've got a lot of different people coming and going, in different time frames, and knock on wood everyone is stepping up to the plate."

Jon and Laura have been stepping up to the plate since the get-go, almost exactly two years now. Anyone who has been in the fickle and frenzied F and B business (Food and Beverage) knows that keeping staff that long is truly remarkable. So, what's his trick to keeping people?

He takes time to contemplate this question. "I don't know, to be honest with you; I try to treat everyone fairly. Ultimately,

it's very self-centered because they're going to take care of me." And what does he offer them in return? "I do the best I can within my means to take care of them. I can't offer any benefits. I offer lousy pay and lousy hours and a lot of stress. If you can deal with that, cool."

Take Laura, who, by the way, is cool as a cucumber. She does everything around here from seating guests to waiting on tables to washing dishes to totting up the numbers. "As long as you do things his way, he's absolutely wonderful to get along with," she says diplomatically. Randy vigorously nods his head in agreement. "Yeah, if I think of something, this is how I want it done."

That goes back to his training in the French method, not just in cooking but also in kitchen management. "The French are very regulated in how they run their kitchen...it's a great management tact." There is a chain of command in the kitchen: executive chef, executive sous chef, chef de cuisine, sous chefs, and then the line cooks.



Photo by Susie Audibert

Sergio Perkins gives the salad a bath. In this kitchen, everybody does everything, particularly during lunch when they are most busy.

But at Sparks, particularly during lunch, everyone does everything. It is not uncommon for Jon or Randy to bring your order straight to your table from the kitchen. They even wash dishes! "It's just a matter of hustling," he shrugs. "You gotta do what you gotta do."

The scene here at Elmwood at Sparks is surprisingly democratic. "I try to give everyone as much freedom as possible." To demonstrate, Randy paraphrases a typical weekend dinner menu brainstorming session on a Wednesday afternoon.

"Jon will say, 'what kind of soup are we going to make this weekend?' And I say, 'I dunno, what do you want to make this

weekend?' Sergio says, 'let's make some soup.' Jon will say, 'well how about these flavors?' 'Sounds good to me,' and Sergio will say, 'well why don't we add this to that.' 'Alright, now how are we going to tie all these flavors together? What are we going to garnish this soup with? What's going to give the extra zing to it?'" You might compare this process to three painters working simultaneously on the same canvas.

And how do we frame this painting? Before dinner, Randy sits down with his staff and does what's called "a pre-meal." He goes over the menu, explains anything they don't understand, "Look, this is the tool I've given you," he tells them. "You take it and you fluff it up as much as you want. Don't lie," he cautions. "You can add all the adjectives you want; just make sure they're true and accurate, and have fun with it."

Randy's been having fun with food ever since he attended East Tennessee State where he majored in ancient history ("What the hell are you going to do with that?") "I've worked in restaurants from day one since I went to college," says this native of central Virginia. After college he hung around Johnson City for an extra year while his wife-to-be, Dawn finished up her Masters in audiology. And because it was obvious who was going to be the breadwinner here, they moved to the Eastern Shore where she took her first job. Randy, meanwhile, attended Johnson and Wales Culinary School in Norfolk.

They settled in Orange in 1997 for geographical reasons. Dawn was offered a job in Fredericksburg; Randy took a job at the Boar's Head Inn kitchen in Charlottesville; Orange was exactly halfway between the two. To this day, Dawn is still commuting to Fredericksburg. "She's been that constant paycheck," says Randy gratefully. "She's the stable one; I'm the erratic one."

But man oh man, what a ride it has been. At the Boar's Head, "I worked my way up from a low-end position all the way up to chef de cuisine in two and a half years." By this time, he was putting in 70-80 hours a week. So, they switched him to a salary, "and the hours were overcoming the salary so



Photo by Susie Audibert

Chef Randy Cooper skims impurities from a wine reduction sauce that has been simmering all day long.



Photo by Susie Audibert

Another employee who has been at Elmwood at Sparks "since day one," is Laura Thoreson who does everything from changing the menu board to doing the books.

it was time for me to take a break."

Randy then worked at the Ivy Inn in Charlottesville as a sous chef for a year. The next stop on this journey was interesting...a month-long intensive unpaid training session, known as a "stage," under Chef Alain LeCompte of Prince Michel in Madison County. What an education! "This is the way you do it," says Randy, rapping his knuckles authoritatively on the table. "You don't veer from this; you don't apply anything else; this is the way it's done." They were drilled that when you dice vegetables the cut must be exactly 1/8th inch by 1/8th inch. "You made your stock exactly...you did not add a gram more or a gram less of anything, and," he points out, "you had a consistent product in the end."

But then he adds, "You do the same thing day in day out for years; that's the fast track to burn out." So, it's not the stress that gets you; it's the boredom. He grins. "It's fun to mix things up." Randy Cooper never wants to be an executive chef of a large facility like the Boar's Head because "all they do is push paper. I don't want that."

So anyway, Randy's next stop was Glenmore Country Club. And then he was recruited to source, set up and run a brand new kitchen in Gordonsville...O'Dell's. But because of fundamental differences, his stint there lasted only two weeks after opening day. "So I said, 'the hell with it; I'm not going to cook,'" and Randy Cooper took four months off to work on Elmwood Farm where he lives.

But it didn't take long for that monkey to return and perch

on his back. Where is this stress junkie going to get his next fix? Forty hours a week doing farm work just isn't cutting it. "The constant stress, the constant pressure, gotta get this done, gotta get this done; some people thrive off that; some people enjoy it; some people can't handle it. I'm probably a mix of both...can't handle it enough so I gotta take it and get it over with."

So he went back to Prince Michel. Alain LeCompte was gone. The kitchen had changed from Classic French to Contemporary American cuisine. Within a month, because of a personnel change, Randy Cooper was promoted to Executive Chef (no paper pushing). Within a year, he was jobless because the winery was sold and the new owners didn't want to be in the F part of the F and B business anymore.

Throughout this entire ride, which by the way is fairly typical, "a lot of bouncing around; that's what we do in this business," Randy had been catering. "That's the seam that runs through it all," he says of this lucrative sideline. He needed refrigeration and prep space, and the then-owner of Sparks, Abdi Aerrozouki, was only too happy to rent that space to him, just as long as he didn't get in the way during lunch. That was around Christmas of 2005. By the following March, Randy had signed the papers and bought the business. After a month of painting and rearranging, Elmwood at Sparks opened its doors.

But not without some help. "My banker was very supportive; we have a couple of investors; they're very supportive. Everyone from staff, to bankers, to lawyers, to investors, to customers have been very supportive," says a sincerely grateful Randy Cooper. "That's what makes it work for us."

Since then, Randy has never let the restaurant muddle along, never let it just be same old, same old. He's always experimenting, trying new things. When he first opened, he served brunch. "Every fifth Sunday would be spectacular, but the four in between did not justify being open for that one good Sunday." So, he stopped. Now he's trying it again. "Regardless, we have to pay for the place 365 days out of the year so we might as well see what we can get out of the place for 365 days a year."

But he's not rushing into these things blindly. He has field-ed calls for expanded dinner service during the week, "but there has to be some volume to make it worth us opening the door up. I can't have staff, I can't afford the electricity, the gas, having a dishwasher come in for 10 covers a night." So, instead he came up with the Dinner to Go idea.

Randy surveys his operation with obvious pride. "We've established what we can do successfully so far. Now it's a matter of how much more can we do; how much more do we want to do." He smiles. "I've got delusions of grandeur here. I always want to keep pushing, keep trying more and more and more. The less a restaurant does the less you keep trying to grow. The more stagnant you become, the less successful you're being, because particularly with a restaurant, they'll get stale," he points to his staff. His eyes become even more piercing. "You have to have that constant drive...that constant drive."



Dinner to Go

Here's how it works. No later than 2 p.m. Tuesday, you fill out your order form for your Wednesday evening dinner. Menus are published for all four Wednesdays of the month online (elmwoodcatering.com) and at the restaurant.

You pick it up, prepackaged and ready to eat between 4-5 p.m. on Wednesday.

Here's what they offered for Feb. 27th: Basil Pesto Stuffed Pork Loin, Herb Buttered Rigatoni and Vegetables. Yum-yum!

Guess what it cost...\$20 and it's enough for three people! Now, that's a deal! Better yet, there's no waste...none!

