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Wednesday, June 11, 2008

Local spotlight

Tasty vegetarian food is recipe for growth

Ferndale entrepreneur to expand by supplying eateries, selling frozen meals, opening kiosk.

Maureen McDonald / Special to The Detroit News

FERNDALE -- With a 6,000 square foot commercial kitchen in Ferndale, a brand new marketing plan and a dollop of moxy, Michele Rastelli, 28, is peppering plans to take Moo Moo's Vegetarian Cuisine to tasty new levels.

In the next two months, the young entrepreneur who started cooking out of her parent's kitchen in Fraser expects to open a food kiosk at Ford Field, supply Moo Moo-specific food items to Eph McNally's, Union Street and other Detroit restaurants and sell her best selling dishes to national frozen food wholesalers.

"My biggest passion is creating dishes with color, texture and flavor that people love to eat," said Rastelli.

Advertisement

Sales sizzlers include roasted cashew stir fry, sweet and spicy curry tofu, baked Indian-style samosa balls and chipotle black bean burrito.

She recently closed the small restaurant she ran in Grosse Pointe Park so that she and her team of six full-time and seven part-time employees could refresh the frozen food segment of the business.

Her parents, owners of Solid Surfaces Unlimited, a granite and quartz business, helped co-sign a small business loan from Chase Bank. They encourage her to plan big.

"Successful entrepreneurs are the ones with the energy and insight to go out there and kick butt. It doesn't matter about age, circumstance or situation,

these individuals hone their niche, keep practicing, keep elevating quality and keep going until they realize a dream," said Michael Bernacchi, professor of marketing at the University of Detroit Mercy.

Rastelli first tasted the notion of a restaurant business at age 18 while sitting in a quaint beach-side café in San Diego.

She took five years of classes at Wayne State University in nutrition, interior design and business.

She devoted several months in San Francisco to an independent study on vegetarian restaurant marketing.

Amid her travels she found few retail food outlets stocking fresh and interesting take-out food for vegetarians. With gusto, she found her grab-and-go niche in 2005.

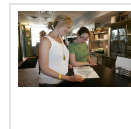
Her timing couldn't be better. The number of declared vegetarians have doubled since 1994, reaching 2.3 percent of the U.S. population, according to the Baltimore-based Vegetarian Resource Group.



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Michele Rastelli talks to Amy McDonald, operations manager of Eph McNally's in Detroit, about supplying vegetarian cuisine to her deli. "Vegetarian doesn't mean a lot of pasta and sodium," said Rastelli. (Wayne E. Smith / The Detroit News)

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More information

Moo Moo's Vegetarian Cuisine

Specialty: Owner Michele Rastelli supplies vegan and gluten-free dishes to health food stores, restaurants, universities and hospitals around the Midwest.

Contact: Call (248) 547-8900 or visit www.moomooscuisine.com

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The increase is largely because of concern for the way animals are treated and secondly because of the amount of cholesterol, fat and chemicals in most foods.

"Vegetarian doesn't mean a lot of pasta and sodium," said Rastelli, a vegetarian since age 14.

"It means combinations with the essential minerals, vitamins and natural things added in a way that tastes good, that satisfies people," she said.

Retailer Joel Fisher, owner of the Natural Food Patch in Ferndale likes the chemical-free, mostly organic content of Moo Moo offerings and prompt serving of the account.


"She delivers a product with good taste that is beautifully packaged. I like the Mediterranean eggplant. Nice mix of flavors."

Maureen McDonald is a Metro Detroit freelance writer.

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A promotional banner for the movie 'Sex and the City'. On the left, there is a photograph of the four main characters. To the right of the photo, the text reads 'DON'T MISS SEX & THE CITY ON THE BIG SCREEN' in a serif font. Below this text is the Fandango logo. To the right of the logo is a pink button with the text 'BUY TICKETS NOW' in white capital letters. The background of the banner is a light pink color with a subtle pattern.

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