

The hottest table in town

Husband-and-wife team has Toronto's Frank's Kitchen cooking

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FRANK AND SHAWN: The team behind Frank's Kitchen's meteoric rise to the top of the Toronto culinary scene

It's every restaurateur's dream: a packed house shortly after opening. Frank Parhizgar and Shawn Cooper have been living the dream for nine months. The husband and wife team are co-owners of Frank's Kitchen — open for just over a year and fast becoming the darling of the Toronto restaurant scene.

It's not simply that reading the menu arouses the salivary glands. (Crisp gnocchi in a gorgonzola cream with pancetta or grilled whole lobster with spinach tortellini garnish in a lemon butter sauce are two offerings that might cause involuntary lip licking). But a string of heavyweight food critics have fawned over the eatery's dishes within the past year leaving little doubt the food measures up to the expectations the sumptuous menu creates.

"Food was always where the love was and the fun was," Parhizgar says about growing up in his family. "Everything started with food."

Parhizgar, 34, was born in Iran and arrived in Toronto in 1988 after fleeing the Iran–Iraq War with his parents and two brothers. They first went to Turkey, then Italy and finally settled in Canada. It seems the most vivid memories of his youth are of his family cooking and eating together.

“It didn’t matter where we were,” he says. “There was always some kind of market nearby where we stayed — all in one room — and there was always food cooking.”

Cooper, 42, says her mother is an excellent cook and meals at their home were often a social event.

“When I was a kid, there was always a party going on centered around food,” Cooper says. So it’s no surprise then that both of them gravitated toward the restaurant industry.

Parhizgar was finding success in his early twenties as an amateur athlete, competing for Canada in the 400 metre sprint. But he says it was tough to find financial backing to travel to events, which were mostly in Europe. To save money, Parhizgar decided to move there. While at a competition in Lyon, France, he walked by an old chateau restaurant and noticed a line of chefs in their white uniforms taking a break outside.

“It was beautiful,” Parhizgar says of the vision. During his off-season, Parhizgar went back and asked for a job. Although he started off carrying sacks of potatoes and cases of wine to the cellar, he eventually graduated to the kitchen and spent four years learning from the head chef. Parhizgar admits it was his dedicated work ethic and his willingness to ask questions that made him stand out.

It wasn’t until the chef invited him to help in the early morning hours, when the prep work took place, that Parhizgar began to learn how to cook with his senses.

“That was when the pastry chefs, the sauciers and the bakers came in,” he says. “I got to watch and smell and taste — I realized this was more of an art form.”

Parhizgar also knew cooking was something that could hold his interest in the long term and decided to give up athletics.

“I felt instantly this is my new coach [the chef], my new team, my new arena.”

After returning to Toronto, he enrolled at George Brown College, to learn the business side of a restaurant, then set about building his reputation as a chef.

He spent six years as head chef at the esteemed fine-dining restaurant Centro and, for a short stint, as Marc Thuet’s executive chef at Thuet.

Parhizgar says working with a highly regarded chef like Thuet and realizing he was on the same level technically and creatively gave him the confidence to go it alone.

“You get in the ring with a heavyweight and you realize you can have your own voice and be a champion,” Parhizgar says.

Parhizgar knew then he wanted his own kitchen, but to complete his vision, he needed Cooper. Married for seven years, the two had met working at a French bistro in Rosedale. Parhizgar was the sous chef and Cooper was bartending.

“He looked cute in his whites,” Cooper says with a smile. The two have an easy chemistry, which doubtless filters through to the ambience of their restaurant. They married a year after meeting and moved to a condo near Bloor West Village. Although Cooper attended Humber for radio broadcasting, and went on to have a brief career as a copy writer, she says she was always moonlighting as a host or server at a restaurant.

“I couldn’t wait to get to my night job,” Cooper says and laughs. And the rush of a busy night hasn’t left.

“It’s exciting,” Cooper says about owning a restaurant. “It’s a show — the music goes on, the lights go down, and something different happens every night.”

But it isn’t all champagne and caviar, especially when it’s on your dime.

“It’s not for the faint of heart,” she says. “You risk everything.”

Initially reluctant, she now says she couldn’t imagine not doing it. Parhizgar was persistent, and the couple secured financing from Parhizgar’s brother.

Cooper — who was general manager at the posh Platinum Club at the Air Canada Centre before the opening of Frank’s Kitchen — has risen through the ranks in the restaurant industry, first as host and server, then as bartender and manager. She says her experience in the various levels of the business prepared her well for her current role.

It becomes obvious that while Parhizgar creates the magnificent dishes Cooper keeps the rest of the restaurant in check.

“You have to be resilient and quick on your feet,” she says. “The dishwasher breaks down or the credit card system, and you have to keep going. “You have to have a Plan B, and if that doesn’t work, a Plan C.”

The atmosphere at Frank’s Kitchen is casual, but the food is being recognized as among Toronto’s finest. Each day Chef Parhizgar travels across the city to hand-pick the vegetables and seafood he’ll use for that night’s meal.

He travels once a week to the St. Jacobs Farmers’ Market, in Waterloo, to buy pigs and lamb, and does all of his butchering and charcuterie in-house. The pasta at Frank’s Kitchen is hand rolled, and all of the breads, cheeses, ice creams and sorbets are handmade.

But, cuisine aside, Cooper and Parhizgar are aware that their success also comes from their approach to service. They know some patrons have made reservations seven weeks in advance to sit at a table in their restaurant, and the couple wants to make sure they have a good time.

“It’s like having a party in your living room,” Cooper says. “You’re the consummate host, but you don’t know who’s coming.”

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