

RESTAURANTS

New roll for steak king

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Philadelphia Daily News

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THE KING OF Steaks stands behind a steel table in a shiny kitchen classroom in the Restaurant School at Walnut Hill College. Frank Olivieri Jr., owner of Pat's King of Steaks, roasts hazelnuts. He slices pork tenderloin. He mixes vinaigrette. He wilts spinach. One of eight students in an advanced culinary class called "The Chef's Palette," the heir to our city's most celebrated junk food is banking on getting an "A."



Frank Olivieri Jr. flips bacon during class at the Restaurant School. (Sarah J. Glover / Staff Photographer)

Like every student at the Restaurant School, Olivieri, 47, wears black-and-white checked pants, black shoes, a white jacket, a burgundy neckerchief and a toque.

This afternoon, his class requires each student to feature one ingredient in three dishes. (Olivieri has hazelnuts.) It's kind of like "Iron Chef," except no one wins, and everyone eats. Class lasts three hours.

This morning, Olivieri attended a similarly long course on marketing. Earlier this week, he had baking and accounting with a restaurant focus. Next week, next semester and next year he'll be still be in school — more classes, same outfit. By spring 2013, he'll have earned both his bachelor of science degree and some serious culinary cred.

Is the King of Steaks trading in his crown for...a chef's hat?

Needless to say, culinary school isn't exactly where you'd expect to find a guy who runs an empire based on frizzled beef, fried onions, white rolls and Cheez Whiz. Olivieri, whose grandfather Harry and great-uncle Pat are considered the co-origins of Philly's official sandwich, doesn't need a second career.

Besides running a successful (to say the least) business that operates 24/7, he's the city's official cheesesteak spokesperson. He's also the dude Domino's called to endorse its cheesesteak pizza. And if you hear one day soon that Arby's is coming out with something the roast beef-based fast food chain will likely call a "Philly cheese steak," well, don't be surprised if they've given him a call, too.

So, Olivieri's busy — too busy, maybe, to enroll full time in a four-year program at the West Philly school. And he has already mastered one form of culinary expertise. Why would he want to be a chef?

Answer is, he doesn't. At least, he doesn't want to be just any old chef. The steak king would like, one day soon, to be a healthy gourmet, a champion of organic, all-natural, as-fresh-as-possible, sustainably farmed foods. He wants to make food that's...holistic.

Family style

Of course, it wasn't always this way. He grew up in the shop his family founded eons ago, the store his dad, Frank Sr., ran through the '80s. At first, he didn't want to join the business. When he graduated from Friends Select in 1982, young Frankie planned to escape South Philly and become a four-star chef.

"I'd applied and was selected to go to the Cordon Bleu in France. I wanted to go either there or to the Culinary Institute of America, in Hyde Park. That was my dream," he said. But that summer, one of Pat's assistant managers quit, and Olivieri put that dream on the shelf.

"I couldn't leave my father there alone to run the business," he explained.

Frank Junior stuck around, then stuck around some more. "Next thing I know, I've got a girlfriend, I'm buying cars, all that," he recalled. Time passed. Business boomed. Olivieri got married, bought a house in Jersey, had kids, got a beach house — the whole nine.

Eventually, he set things up so he didn't have to sling steaks and onions all day, every day. He even managed to carve out enough free time to pursue nonfood interests. Made kind of a tradition of it.

"Every year I kinda do something different to further my education," Olivieri said. "I've gotten my bartending license, my radio license..." (You could say the King of Steaks is also a renaissance man.)

Still, his newfound knowledge and expertise never satisfied that old itch. So, he did what any good husband would do. He listened to his wife.

"She'd been telling me for the last 20 years to go to culinary school," he said. Two years ago, when both his youngest child and his wise spouse enrolled in college, Olivieri took

the leap, too.

A serious man

Although he's several years older than most of his classmates — and the only one who's been an owner in the business for a few decades — still, the King of Steaks fits right in.

Restaurant School chef-instructor Mark Bellini has had Olivieri in two classes. "Way back when he was a freshman, I was like, we have a celebrity coming to our school. He's going to want special privileges," remembered Bellini. Today, the professor sees Olivieri differently. "Frank's a pretty amazing guy. He's very good with all the other students. He's very generous, so even-tempered."

Bellini also said his student is a seriously hard worker. "My God, he's a monster. He just goes and goes. Sure, he's running a [lucrative] business, but he's such an everyman, down to earth, the salt of the earth. He's doing this for real, not just because he has nothing better to do."

He's also doing it because, well, he wants to live life to the fullest — and healthiest. He said that about a decade ago, "my wife and I decided we wanted to live better. We wanted to have our children live healthier and better. We want to live long enough and healthy enough to see our grandchildren." So they changed their diets, cutting some things out, adding others, watching movies such as "Food, Inc.," and vowing to patronize ethical, sustainable farming practices.

These days, the Olivieri fridge is filled with food that's organic or, at least, "absolutely nothing processed. The only thing in my freezer is ice cubes," he said, adding, "I'm gonna be the healthiest poor person in the world for shopping at Whole Foods."

Friday nights, he makes organic pizzas that he describes as "like Stella [Stephen Starr's pizza restaurant] but better."

Asked how he'll combine his diet and degree, and he said he'd like to teach. He's also thought about opening up a restaurant. He will not, however, leave the family business. But he might change it — a little bit.

Olivieri said he'll never be able to justify taking the Whiz off Pat's menu, and the rolls will always be made with white flour. But they'll be fresh rolls, never older than a few hours.

When it comes to meat, he's now sourcing beef from "the most humane places in the world — Uruguay, New Zealand, Australia, some farms in the States, too," he said, adding, "A good friend is an attorney from PETA, so I kind of have to."

Translation: The King of Steaks is a four-star chef, a health food nut — and besties with an animal-rights activist. Doesn't really make sense. But in a way, it totally figures.