

FORK, SPOON, LIFE

Drawing on Sicilian heritage, Semolina MKE owner makes pasta and teaches classes in Bay View

*Fork. Spoon. Life. Petra Orlowski***Kristine M. Kierzek** Special to the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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Just outside the entrance of Semolina MKE, 2474 S. Kinnickinnic Ave., you're greeted by an edible herb garden featuring nasturtiums, basil and rosemary. Every item makes its way into pastas and products made in-house by owner Petra Orlowski.

She spent years working in some of Milwaukee's most well-known restaurants, from Sanford to Mistral and Blue's Egg. When restaurants shut down during the pandemic, she perfected pasta recipes. Then people started asking to buy her pastas.

The Bay View native opened Semolina MKE in October 2021. Now with a reason to explore her Sicilian roots more deeply, earlier this year she visited Italy. She filled up on food, took cooking classes and visited farms and wineries producing products she carries in her shop. Every item is made or hand-picked by Orlowski, from the pastas, sauces and meatballs to marinated olives, capers, cheeses, olive oils and cannoli.

Semolina MKE is open Tuesday through Friday 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Saturdays and Sundays 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Orlowski offers classes select Fridays from 7:30 to 9:30 p.m. and Saturdays from 3:30 to 5:30 p.m. To sign up, call the shop at (414) 249-4472. For current class offerings, go to semolinamke.com.

Family food roots

I am half Mexican and half Italian. My mother is 100% Sicilian, born here. Both my grandparents, her parents, are Sicilian.

Seeing Sicily

We stayed at an estate, Mandranova, which also produces the olive oil we carry. We were literally in the middle of the olive groves. We were able to see how they grow everything. We also went to Bona Furtuna, which is in the center of Sicily in Corleone. My grandma's family is from basically the next town over. We went to a couple wineries. Sicily is unbelievably beautiful. It is completely different than mainland Italy.

We plan on making it a yearly trip now so we can keep up these relationships and make new ones to bring more products in from small producers.

Grandma's influence

My grandma Rosie, she's in the picture on the wall here, was a big influence. Her food was simple but very flavorful. Everybody wanted to eat grandma's food all the time. She wasn't shy with salt, but nothing was salty. It was just right. My sister and I, my cousins, we stayed at their house all the time. She would cook every single day. As I got older she started showing me more. She was a character.

My first time making pasta I don't remember. I can remember watching my grandmother make it. She didn't make it often. We were definitely store-bought pasta family. But when she made it, it was usually for chicken soup.

Feeding her needs

I have twins. I was home with them until they went to school. I wanted to go back to work. ... My husband worked during the day. OK, I can get a job at night somewhere and the kids don't have to go to day care. ... I looked at catering. I started as a banquet waitress. Then I saw an ad for Sanford and started as a host, then became a server and the operations manager. I was there for 15 years or so. I worked there, ended up getting divorced.

In order to do that I worked a bunch of different jobs, bartending, pastry chef at Sheridan's in Cudahy. I loved working with Joe (Schreiter). I worked with him at Mistral before he went to The Diplomat. In 2018 I started at Blue's Egg in Shorewood. I worked there until it closed in the pandemic.

Perfecting pasta

I was sitting home and just started making pasta and sourdough. I went deep into the pasta and really turned my dining room into my pasta lab. My husband made a big board for me to make all the pasta on the dining room table. I bought bins for my flour so I could buy 50 pounds at a time.

Beginning her business

I was under the impression that because it was all flour it was fine to sell out of my house. I did that for a while. Then I was on the Milwaukee Foodie page on Facebook. One of their posts said something about we understand a lot of you are doing things, but we cannot post your stuff if it goes against any of the cottage food laws. It listed all the things you can't sell out of your home. Noodles was one of them. Wait a minute, I thought that was good.

I had to work out of a commercial kitchen. I decided I was going to buy the extruder, a big investment. I was planning on doing that and contacted Katie Rose at Goodkind. Paul (Zerkel), Lisa (Kirkpatrick) and Katie were willing to let me work from their kitchen, but then I was going through other issues. The (extruder) machine was made in Italy, so it is not NSF (certified). The health inspector said I needed a variance. I'm not going to put another business in jeopardy, so no Goodkind. Then I was working across the street from this building. There was a "for rent" sign here. That was it.

What she carries

It is not exclusively Italian, but I do try to go with small producers. Bona Furtuna, I carry two of their oils. I use their wild fennel seeds in my sauce and in my marinated olives. I will crush it for crackers. This fennel from their land, they get about 300 jars per year. I was like "I will take all of it!"

They have this guy working for them, he has a PhD in agronomy and botany. He has mapped out everything there and knows every olive tree on that property, what type it is and the age, and all of the other plants as well.

About her products

My dried pastas I always have on hand. I use a combination of semolina and a stone ground wheat from Meadowlark mills in Ridgeway. It is important to me to support local producers

as well as the small producers in Italy. I carry their beans and polenta as well.

I always have my sauces that I make, a pomodoro sauce that is vegan, and an arrabiata spicy sauce. For my fresh pastas, I make ravioli on Wednesdays. The culurgiones, a Sardinian pasta filled with mashed potato, I make those on Saturdays. The other days, I just play around.

Creating classes

A few years ago, I was making ravioli. We had a bunch of friends over for a pasta party. I set up my dining room table and everyone had a spot, their fillings. It was a fun time. Not too long after that we went to Italy, my husband and my two kids, for their 21st birthday. We took a cooking class. ... I could do this.

I did a couple trials with friends at home. I have come to really enjoy the classes. My husband, Andy, acts as the cleaning elf. We can have up to six students. It keeps everything very hands on. You get wine, we have fun.

The first is a classic egg dough. ...The other class I do is hand-shaped pasta, which people really seem to like. It is like Play-doh. You get to make all these different shapes. ... Classes are \$65 per person plus tax.

Her everyday eat

If I am just at home making pasta, I love pappardelle.

Always available

Dried pasta, six (shapes). Then I usually have at least one fresh pasta available. Right now I have ravioli and pappardelle. It almost always sells out. I don't make tons, because I can always make more.

I will start making potato gnocchi again in the fall. It wasn't as popular once it got hot. That was a big seller in cooler weather. That was available Thursdays, and it will be again come fall.

What she loves to teach

The best part about pasta is it is very hard to mess up. That's what I like teaching people. Everybody can do it. I am maybe teaching my way out of sales with that, but I think it is fun.

Taste and travel

We brought back a lot of wine, preserves and marmalades, sun-dried tomatoes we bought in the market in Palermo, and salted capers. These things I use very sparingly because I won't be back there for a while. They're just so delicious.

At Mandranova, we did a cooking class with the owner and learned pesto with sun-dried tomatoes, her recipe with almonds, cheese, lemon juice, basil and mint. Very simple, but the most delicious sauce I have ever had. I just went to Paradise Roastery and got almonds to make that sauce.

Come for the cannoli

I do cannoli kits. I make the filling. I have sets, a full dozen or half dozen. The kit comes with a piping bag and either a half pound or full pound of filling and something to decorate the ends, either chopped chocolate or candied orange peel. You fill them as you eat them. No soggy shells.

Perfect pasta prep

No oil in the water. Yes to salt. Hard yes to salt. What I tell my classes as far as the oil is concerned, you're basically putting a raincoat on your pasta if you add oil in there. It is covering it so your sauce will just slide off. You want the sauce to stick to your starch.

When she's not cooking

Honestly, I'm at Puddler's Hall. I used to work there, and all of my friends are there. It is where I met my husband.

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