

Talk to a chef

# Pub bubbles with friends

*Ventura's Signature restaurant capitalizes on Portuguese cuisine and warm hospitality*

BY KATRINA SIMMONS

Virgilio Ventura gets e-mails, letters and Christmas cards from customers he has served at his restaurant. "I just got three CDs from Hong Kong, and a postcard from Macau," he says, always surprised by these thoughtful gestures.

That's what happens when customers walk in the door of Ventura's Signature restaurant as strangers; they leave feeling like old friends.

Perhaps the nature of travellers' chance encounters with kindred souls brings out the best in them. And it's travellers that Ventura set his sights on when he redesigned his Portuguese restaurant on James Street North.

It's the only place to hear fado in the city, the mournful and soul stirring music of his homeland. People who have heard it sung on a visit to Portugal are drawn to Ventura's Signature when an occasional evening performance is scheduled. But his gregarious nature and authentic food are the features that move customers to send their friends to him.

Fourteen years ago, he hoped to attract a Portuguese crowd when he opened his original pub. But there were already similar places along that stretch of James, and their regulars were staying put. So he did an about-face, focusing instead on people who had been overseas and couldn't get enough of the food, the hospitality and the music.

It's easy to feel the pull of the sea, sitting amidst brass fixtures, low light and a dark wood ceiling. With fado music playing in the background, it takes all of my discipline, and a very pressing appointment to loosen the grip of Ventura's story-telling. It's no surprise that customers trust him to choose for them from the menu, and friends of friends arrive on another's recommendation.

He has spent most of his life in restaurants in Portugal and Canada, following in his father's footsteps. He is the master chef, he says, but these days his wife rules the kitchen. As she serves up signature dishes like her Arroz de Marisco, done just so, he welcomes regulars and newcomers. And when he sends them off into the night, no one leaves as a stranger.

Ventura's Signature is located at 178 James St. N. in Hamilton.

ksimmons@thespec.com



RON ALBERTSON, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Virgilio Ventura takes up a spot behind the bar at his restaurant.

## Arroz de Marisco com Filetes (Seafood Rice with Golden Fillet)

Makes 8 servings

- 2½ cups (560 mL) vegetable oil (divided)
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) tomato paste
- 1 medium onion, finely chopped
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) hot sauce
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) black pepper
- 2 cups (500 mL) baby salad shrimp
- 1½ cups (375 mL) large shrimp
- 10 oz (280 g) baby clams (canned)

- 1/2 cup (125 mL) beer
- 6 cups (1½ L) water
- 1½ cups (375 mL) Spanish style yellow rice OR basmati rice
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 8 turbot fillets
- 1/2 cup (125 mL) lemon juice
- 2 eggs, beaten
- 1/4 lb (115 g) flour

In a medium pot, combine 1/4 cup (60 mL) of the vegetable oil, the tomato paste, onion, hot sauce, pepper, all of the shrimp, clams

and beer. Stir for 5 minutes over medium-high heat. Add water and rice to pot, and let boil for about 10 to 12 minutes. Add salt and pepper and turn off heat. Cover with a lid and let sit for 10 to 15 minutes.

Cut turbot fillets in half. Marinate in lemon juice, salt and pepper a few minutes. Heat 2 cups (500 mL) of vegetable oil in a deep pan over medium heat. Place beaten eggs and flour in separate medium bowls. Dip fish in egg, then roll in flour. Fry in hot oil until golden brown. Serve with the seafood rice, and garnish with black olives and a lemon wedge.

**Approximate nutrition per serving:** 460 calories; 22 g fat; 51 g protein; 12 g carbohydrates; 1 g fibre

# Make It Tonight

*Quick meals from scratch tested by The Hamilton Spectator*

## Beef Stroganoff With Smoked Paprika Over Noodles



PHOTOS BY TORY ZIMMERMAN THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Makes 4 servings

- 6 cups (1.5 L) pasta OR egg noodles
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) butter
- 1/4 cup (60 mL) chopped fresh chives
- Salt and pepper
- 4 tsp (20 mL) all-purpose flour
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) Spanish smoked paprika (see note)
- 1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt
- 1/4 tsp (1 mL) pepper
- 3/4 lb (340 g) beef sirloin steak, cut into thin strips
- 2 tbsp (30 mL) olive oil, divided
- 1 medium onion, chopped
- 3 cups (750 mL) sliced brown mushrooms
- 2 large garlic cloves, minced
- 1 cup (250 mL) beef stock
- 1 tbsp (15 mL) ketchup
- 1 cup (250 mL) light sour cream
- 1/3 cup (80 mL) chopped fresh Italian parsley

**1** Cook noodles in large pot of boiling salted water until tender; drain and return to pot. Add butter, chives, and salt and pepper to taste. Keep hot.



**2** Combine flour, paprika, 1/2 tsp (2 mL) salt and pepper in a small bowl; set aside. Sprinkle steak strips with salt.



In a large heavy skillet, heat 1 tbsp (15 mL) oil over medium-high heat. Add steak and sauté for 3 to 5 minutes or until no longer pink. Remove steak and set aside. Reduce heat to medium.

**3** Add remaining oil to skillet. Add onion, mushrooms and garlic; sauté until vegetables are tender. Increase heat to high, return steak to skillet and sprinkle with flour mixture; cook for 1 minute, stirring constantly. Stir in stock and ketchup; cook for 2 minutes, stirring constantly. Remove pan from heat and stir in sour cream and parsley. Add salt and pepper to taste. Serve over hot noodles.



**Note:** Spanish smoked paprika (also called pimenton) is available in specialty food stores. You can substitute regular sweet or hot paprika, depending on your taste.

**Approximate nutrition per serving:** 520 calories; 22 g fat; 33 g protein; 48 g carbohydrates; 3 g fibre

### Tip of the day

A reader wants to know if she has to refrigerate lemons since they are not refrigerated in the store. You don't have to, but refrigeration will extend their shelf life. Lemons are commonly sprayed with an inert gas to help preserve them in the store; this wears off with time. If you store lemons at room temperature, they'll last one to two weeks. In a bag in the crisper, it stretches to four to five weeks.



— Dan Kislenko, The Hamilton Spectator

**Do you have a question** about an ingredient or technique? We'll find the answer for Tip of the Day. Call 905-526-3450 or e-mail gofood@thespec.com.

### Grain of salt

Food facts and fun stuff

Kenneth Daigneau won \$100 for coming up with the name Spam at a 1936 New Year's party given by Spam inventor Jay Hormel. It's a contraction of "spiced ham."

— Sara Perkes, The Hamilton Spectator

# Food industry needs to rethink seniors

BY JUDY CREIGHTON

Big-box supermarkets, dimly lit restaurants, grocery packaging bearing tiny lettering — these are but a few issues the food industry must begin addressing as the Canadian population ages.

"I don't think any of these industries are looking very far ahead to the greying of society," says Richard Loreto, who specializes in demographic trends in Canada and the United States and the implications for consumer products and services.

He believes that's a weakness generally in all business sectors where there is a dominance of short-term perspective rather than long-term planning for the inevitable. "Unfortunately people wait until it hits them."

Statistics Canada released population projections last month showing that senior citizens will outnumber children by about 2015, just nine years from now. And that aging trend will affect almost every area of society.

One of those segments is the food industry, says Loreto. "The food industry needs to look longer term and in their own strategic thinking begin to make the shift which inevitably will be important to them," he says. "And so if the seniors market is relatively small today, you know if you do the analysis it is going to be a larger market 10 to 20 years from now."

Today's huge supermarkets will likely be daunting to seniors with walkers, prompting them to turn to smaller grocery outlets.

Packaging is another hot-button issue for seniors, Loreto says. Food packages are al-



SHERYL NADLER, THE HAMILTON SPECTATOR

Richard Loreto at the Farmers' Market in downtown Hamilton.

ready cluttered with information on ingredients and nutrition, making reading what's on most products difficult, especially for aging eyes. Ditto for restaurant menus.

"The notion of a candlelight dinner with a fancy menu for those in their 60s is just not on because they aren't going to be able to read what they want to order," he says.

Loreto says wise entrepreneurs might tap into housebound seniors' desire for quality ready-made meals delivered to their homes along with groceries.

"It's a great business opportunity," he says, "because as we get older we not only want better quality and service, but we'll be able to pay for it."

Loreto adds that the poor senior who can't afford quality and service is a myth. "That was true 20 or 30 years ago when seniors were the focus of the poverty issue, but people born during the Depression or war years have done well financially.

"So there is a niche market at present and an ever-growing market in the future to service seniors as they become less mobile as they inevitably will when they reach their 80s."

Loreto says there is another popular myth that baby boomers, who were born in the years after the end of the Second World War, are different from today's seniors.

"It wrongly believes that the boomers are more hip, more cool and they won't get arthritis or have any of the health problems their parents have," he says.

"I am sorry to say that boomers are not invincible to health problems like heart disease, diabetes and arthritis," says Loreto, 56.

Another trend that should be considered with a growing seniors market is that their consumption goes down, "but they are buying quality food such as seafood, not fish sticks."

Loreto says that all sectors of the industry must start including seniors in its focus groups, whether it is to do with food products, delivery, packaging or supermarket access. "And yet the impact of demographics in this age group is not being tended to," he stresses. "If they think strategically, they will realize there is going to be a significant change."

The Canadian Press

### Canada's aging population

■ By 2031, seniors will account for about a quarter of the population, or almost double the current proportion.

■ The 65-plus crowd will likely overtake children under 15 in about 10 years.

■ By 2031, seniors will number between 8.9 million and 9.4 million.

■ The glut of baby boomers, who begin turning 65 in 2011, is the driving force behind the population shift. — Statistics Canada