

Innovative dishes come fresh

Seasonal and local fare from chef Yitzhak Sheri's hands

• By MIRIAM KRESH

Amble down Jerusalem's Nahalat Shiva pedestrian street with its stone houses, ironwork street lamps and air of history embracing the modern. Close to the end of the street, to the right, you'll find the Piccolino restaurant. Climb up the flagged steps, noting the baskets filled with colorful peppers, pumpkins and eggplants sitting on top of wine barrels. Already you get a sense of the style.

"Piccolino" means "little one" in Italian, but the chef there is a very tall man. Indifferent to the irony, Yitzhak Sheri, 31, towers over the pots and pans, shaking a skillet here and reducing a sauce there, managing multiple dishes with a nonchalant ease that disguises the intense focus of a natural artist. Under his hands, all the fresh produce you noticed upon entering is being transformed into luscious food.

"I've cooked since I was very young – maybe 12 years old – together with my mother," says the soft-spoken chef. "At age 18, I went to work in the kitchen of a chain restaurant. The cook there didn't allow me to handle any raw ingredients except for mushrooms. I sliced mushrooms for two weeks. When he saw I wasn't going to give up, he let me start cooking. That's how I learned, working there and later in other professional kitchens."

Sheri's Tunisian/Moroccan family background gave him a love of big flavors that naturally segued into the Mediterranean, Italian-accented cuisine at which he's adept.

"It's important to keep flavor memories in your head, so you have a base for creating new dishes," he says. "I find cooking soothing. I'm never happier than when there's pressure in the kitchen, when the restaurant is crammed with hungry diners and I've got to get the food out fast. I know it sounds strange, but you either like it, or you don't."

Piccolino manager Orit Dahan chimes in: "It's true, Yitzhak loves action, and when can take a break, he likes to go around the tables and talk to the diners, ask if they're satisfied. He also gives out recipes if people ask. He doesn't hold back any culinary secrets." In fact, many of Sheri's recipes are printed out on postcards that the restaurant gives out to customers.

In Jerusalem asked if the young chef cooks at home.

"Mostly, my wife cooks," he says, smiling. "I don't go into the kitchen at home. Not because I'm tired when I get home; simply, I like my wife's cooking. Although if she's under a lot of pressure before Shabbat, I'll step in and help out." Sheri and his wife, parents of three, made the decision to keep Shabbat and kashrut some three years ago.

Asked what advice he has for aspiring cooks, Sheri says, "Today, people think

they'll fail in the kitchen. They turn to prepared foods, things you just heat up. You shouldn't be afraid to cook. I myself didn't go to culinary school; I learned everything in the workplace and I don't regret it. Still, if you want to cook professionally, I advise working in a professional kitchen for a year or two, then go to cooking school. There are so many out there to choose from."

Sheri gained his cooking skills through hard work in life's school, but his routine follows a conventional path.

"I prepare the next day's menu the night before, making sure I have my ingredients at hand and the work stations ready. Depending on demand, I may work 12, 14 or even 16 hours." His intuitive style doesn't make use of measuring cups or spoons. "I cook like a Moroccan grandmother, everything measured by eye. Even when I'm turning out 200 dishes a day."

Winter, a less demanding season, gives Sheri a little downtime for innovative cooking.

"There's no time to think in the summer. The restaurant's full and the pressure's high. Come winter, I have time to imagine new dishes." He showed me

photographs of a bread stuffed with Swiss chard and goat's cheese, then baked; it looked savory and tempting. Another photograph displays Sheri's speciality, fish: oven-baked local mullet with roasted red pepper salsa and black lentils.

Dahan adds, "Yitzhak recently dreamed up a new dish calling for Camembert cheese, balsamic vinegar and honey, capers, dates, bananas and pecans – in a loaf of bread. He gave it to the waiters to taste. Everyone liked it, so it was added to the menu, and the customers rave about it. Another dish he invented is rye flour pizza. That was a special customer request. It took a lot of work and experimenting, but in the end, Yitzhak made an exceptionally delicious pizza with a 100% rye crust."

The rye pizza recipe is one of the few whose secrets Sheri doesn't share.

Sheri likes to have family around. He brought his younger brother and a cousin to work in Piccolino. "We also live close to each other," he says. Dahan approvingly says, "It's all part of the family feeling I like to promote here."

Sheri enjoys creating delicacies that reflect seasonal ingredients. The menu at Piccolino offers lighter dishes in summer,



Piccolino chef Yitzhak Sheri: A love of big flavors. (Miriam Kresh)

switching to cozier, more substantial recipes when chilly winds blow between the stone houses of Nahalat Binyamin.

Piccolino

12 Yoel Moshe Salomon Street, Jerusalem
(02) 624-4186. Kosher lemehadrin.
www.piccolino.co.il

Saffron corvina fillet with root vegetable puree

This recipe takes advantage of winter's flavorful root vegetables in a dish that's light, but satisfying.

Makes four servings

For the fish:

- 1 filleted corvina (*musar yam*) in four pieces
- 3 Tbsp. olive oil
- 4 garlic cloves
- Pinch saffron threads infused in ½ cup hot water
- ½ cup fresh orange juice
- ½ cup vegetable stock or water
- Salt and pepper to taste
- 50 gr. unsalted butter

For the puree:

- 1 kg. peeled potatoes
- 1 peeled parsley root
- 1 peeled celeriac (celery) root
- Salt and white pepper to taste
- 1 200-ml. container sour cream
- ¼ teaspoon prepared mustard
- 50 gr. unsalted butter

For the garnish:

- A large handful of radish or beet sprouts

Slice the vegetables for the puree thinly. Cover the vegetables with water and place over medium heat. Cook covered until the vegetables are cooked through and soft. While the vegetables simmer, cook the fish:

Heat the three tablespoons of olive oil in a large, heavy skillet. Keep the



(Assaf Amram)

temperature medium-high. Place the fish pieces in the skillet, skin-side down. Sear the fish until the bottom is golden.

Turn the fish over and add the garlic. Continue cooking until the now-reversed side is golden; a few minutes. Add the saffron-infused water, orange juice and stock. Season the fish and liquids with salt and pepper.

Cook until the liquids are reduced by half. Add 50 gr. butter, cook one fur-

ther minute. Remove the fish and sauce from the heat. Drain and mash the vegetables for the puree. Add salt and pepper, sour cream, mustard and 50 grams of butter to the mashed vegetables and blend well.

Arrange the puree on a platter, or individual portions on four dishes. Remove the fish from the sauce and place the pieces on the puree. Pour the sauce over all. Garnish with the radish sprouts and serve.