

Last Thursday afternoon, I traveled to Angelina's Kitchen, 2170-H Eagle Creek Lane, and spoke with Angela Verrastro. She and her husband own and operate this take-out restaurant that features Italian cuisine. Here are some excerpts from our conversation:

BE: I understand you grew up in New York with a Jewish mother and an Italian father. That must have made for some interesting cross-cultural meals, like maybe spaghetti with matzah balls. Does this family background affect the menu at Angelina's Kitchen?

AV: Well, yes. One of the regular menu items we have is a chicken soup that's got kind of a Jewish and Italian blend. My Jewish mom taught me how to cook the soup and I put Italian cooking greens into it. That's probably one of the best examples.

BE: By the way, I'm guessing the "Angelina" in Angelina's Kitchen isn't you, it's your grandmother.

AV: Yes.

BE: Is she one of your culinary idols?

AV: Yes. She was always in the kitchen, always cooking, always busy putting things on the table.

BE: Didn't you also learn about cooking while in Europe? It wasn't in Bulgaria, was it?

AV: No, when I was in college I spent some time in Madrid and parts of Spain. Whenever I could I'd visit the markets. I also spent a year in Brussels. As much as possible, I took cooking classes with fantastic cooks over there. I also spent as much time as I could in the open-air markets there.

BE: What brought you to exotic Woodbury?

AV: Originally, we had to travel around a bit because of my husband's job. About a year-and-a-half ago we sat down and decided we wanted to make Woodbury our home. We have four young children, ranging in age from six to almost 13. We didn't want to move around anymore.

BE: That's a good reason.

AV: We feel Woodbury is a great community to raise a family. Opening Angelina's Kitchen has, for sure, helped us to put down some permanent roots.

BE: Is this your first time in the restaurant business?

AV: Oh yes.

BE: Did you do much research before you got into it, like on what to expect?

AV: Fortunately or unfortunately — I don't know which is the case — I'm learning you can never really be sure of what to expect in the restaurant business. I think it's good, though. Last winter, I decided to do a little pilot program out of my house, cooking for my neighbors and friends.

BE: It looks like it went well or we wouldn't be here today.

AV: We did it to see if people wanted what I had in mind to offer. The response was extremely positive, which led me to believe that people did want good home cooking when they didn't have time to do it themselves — and in the comfort of their own homes.

BE: Angelina's Kitchen is fairly new, isn't it?

AV: We opened in September .

BE: So that's how long you've been slaving over a hot stove?

AV: (Laughing) Pretty much.

BE: Your business slogan is "Take out you'll feel great about."

AV: Yup.

BE: What made you decide to operate a take out restaurant, as opposed to a place for sit-down dining establishment?

AV: For me, it's all about the food. I really wanted to concentrate my efforts in the kitchen. I put 110 percent of my efforts into making sure that the food that goes out the door is the best quality, best tasting and freshest food possible.

BE: Sounds like that's really important to you.

AV: One of the things that gave seed to this idea came years ago when my children were much smaller and my husband was traveling a lot. I was just not happy with the choices for fast food that were out there. Obviously, I loved to cook. But, with four small children, I didn't have time to put the meals on the table that I felt my family should be eating. Yet, I didn't want to drag everybody out to a restaurant, especially in the winter in Minnesota.

BE: Like it's been lately.

AV: My friends and I would just lament over the fact that there just wasn't take-out that was the quality that we wanted to feed our families. Routinely, we'd hear comments among ourselves like "Oh my gosh, we've had take-out three times this week. I have got to cook tonight."

BE: Sounds like the conversations we have at my house.

AV: I thought, wouldn't it be great if there was a take-out place that you didn't have to feel guilty about when it came to feeding your family — even if it was once, twice or three times a week. That's what this is about.

BE: Catering is also a service you offer. Is there an art to creating large trays of food, or do you just slap some stuff together and hope people eat it quickly?

AV: No, we take a lot of pride in the presentation of the food trays. There are some examples of them shown on our Web site. I'm proud of the artistry that we put into them. What you see is part of the whole experience when it comes to eating.

BE: Yes, if the meal looks bad, you could be off to a bad start.

AV: It's not just about what food tastes like. I believe all of the senses should be involved when it comes to food.

BE: OK, confess: Do you ever sneak out and eat non-Italian foods like hamburgers or fried chicken?

AV: Oh, I eat non-Italian food all the time.

BE: I mean the food that's bad for you but tastes great. Do you give into temptation sometimes?

AV: Actually, my family really doesn't do fast food. But I believe balance is everything. We don't call ourselves a health food eatery, but we use high quality, fresh ingredients and prepare them in the most healthful way possible.

BE: So, does your balance theory apply to the cupcakes you have on the menu at Angelina's Kitchen, too?

AV: (Laughing) Well, there's nothing wrong with an extra cupcake now and then, don't you think?

For more information on Angelina's Kitchen, visit [www.angelinaskitchen.com](http://www.angelinaskitchen.com) or call (651) 998-0474.

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