

Platte Valley Medical Center Chef Michael Anderson prepares to place a roasted vegetable calzone into the pizza oven in the hospital Bistro.

Abby Wright photo



Chef's secret ingredient? Creativity

By Abby Wright

Inspiration seems to come from many sources and manifests itself as creativity. That creativity, if passion accompanies it, then results in some form of art. Platte Valley Medical Center's Silver Aspen Bistro Executive Chef Michael Anderson adds to and tweaks recipes to produce unique food combinations that help make the hospital's cafeteria a successful and growing business that keeps people happy and healthy.

It started back when he was a 15-year-old bus boy at a family-owned Italian restaurant called Sabatini's, in Illinois. Sabatini's trained and promoted him to be a cook, which he did through college. After earning his geology degree in 1982 from Northern Illinois University of DeKalb and finding that the field was not a feasible option for him, he realized he actually enjoyed cooking very much and wanted to turn it into a career.

In 1984, he moved to Colorado to be close to the mountains. After being a chef at some five-star restaurants and hotels, Anderson ended up at PVMC, and has been there for almost 10 years. He has been executive chef there since 2006 and loves

it not merely as a job but as a hobby and lifestyle.

Anderson cooks all day for his career as a chef, and cooking is also the first thing he does on his personal time when he arrives home from work. He often uses recipes from home for work and vice versa.

He has prepared "pretty much everything," including but not limited to Italian, American, and southwestern styles. His favorite dish to cook is – well, whatever he feels like in the moment, because he likes it all.

Recently, he has more Mediterranean on his plate – literally, at home where he has been cooking more of it, and figuratively, in the PVMC kitchen, where he envisions employing more Mediterranean recipes and side dishes in the near future. These will be in addition to the gyros (warm pita bread wrapped around vegetables, tender and slender-cut meat, and tzatziki sauce) the Bistro offers every four weeks.

Silver Aspen switches out lunch every four weeks and, at dinner, the grill and deli station are always open, but there might be a day or two during the cycles when Anderson and other cooks will alter an item. Sometimes recipes are

reused because people like them so much. The Bistro's typical offerings include a salad bar, pizza station (Mondays, Wednesdays, Fridays), and delicatessen (Tuesdays and Thursdays), where people can order any type of sandwich or have one made with all the trimmings they choose themselves.

Anderson worked on development of both the inpatient and general-public menus, which are updated frequently and include items such as pizza and baked rigatoni; desserts; meat, poultry, and fish dishes that are grilled, baked, or both; and specialties. "We're constantly putting menus together to mix it up and keep people interested," Anderson said.

Some dishes are experiments, which Anderson likes conducting. Cooking, he says, is "a fun thing to do. You're like a chemist." He doesn't like baking, per se, because, for baking, weights and measurements must be precise, and he prefers to just "throw stuff together" because the method is simple and quick. But as with any experiment, "Sometimes it turns out; sometimes it's weird."

He likes to dress pizza in different toppings. The chef recalls trying to top PVMC pizza with shredded, barbecued duck; pork belly and

spinach and onions; and baked eggs at some point, none of which became popular. The newest trial the day *Local Color*® visited with Anderson was a roasted vegetable calzone with eggplant, red peppers, squash, and ricotta cheese, which had not proved to be a smash hit either.

In honor of one of the Broncos games last month, the Bistro offered some special dishes, including a play on chicken and waffles (a popular food combination down south on the West Coast). For that dish, the Bistro filled waffle ice cream cones with some mashed potatoes and fried popcorn chicken nuggets, then poured maple Dijon sauce on top.

The chefs also made Italian nachos; they fried wontons instead of using corn chips as the base, then added pepperoni, sliced banana peppers, sausage, Alfredo and marinara sauces, and mozzarella cheese on top. A Pittsburgh sandwich (because the Broncos played the Steelers) was adapted from another restaurant and consisted of Italian bread, hot pastrami, provolone cheese, vinegar-based (not creamy) coleslaw, and French fries on top. Then, a bratwurst on a pretzel hoagie bun with peppers and onions mimicked the "thunder dog" served during games at Mile-High Stadium.

Anderson's palette is vast, and he gleans his meal creation inspirations and menu inclusions from all over the place: the Internet, the Food Network, cookbooks, and delicious-sounding or -tasting menu items at restaurants where he has dined. He sees, tastes, or hears about a good recipe and automatically thinks, "Oh, this sounds good. You know, I'm gonna put this on the menu."

While the Silver Aspen's variety is due in part to the different types of food and meals themselves being offered, the other part of it is the nutritional value of the food. The menu for patients accommodates to a wide array of dietary needs and health considerations. For example, cardiac patients need low-sodium diets, so low-sodium options are

available and easy to find on their room menu. Dietitians check over the menu items. Some, such as tilapia, are healthy across the board. The room service for inpatients is available from 7 a.m. through 7 p.m. every day. Anderson said of the patients, "We want them to eat and get well so they can go home and finish recovery."

Anderson is mostly responsible for the cafeteria, where people are to decide for themselves what is appropriate for their diet. Anderson has made that convenient by adding labels that display calorie, fat, and sodium content for each entrée. He encourages folks at home to use the Internet and cookbooks as resources to match their own nutritional needs.

Using healthy ingredients in cooking, such as extra virgin olive oil and alternative spices to salt, he said, are easy ways people can be healthier – and, of course, cooking for themselves period, since restaurant and precooked food from grocery stores often have excessive sugar and salt contents.

He has taught a few classes at the hospital to inform people how to make their own rich-tasting chicken or beef stock for soups and sauces without using salt and fat. He adds as a general health tip: "Moderation, I think, is the key."

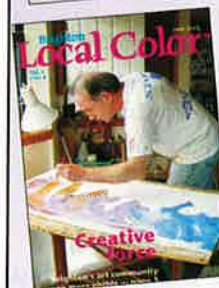
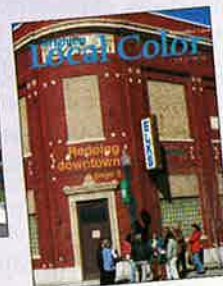
Another goal of the Silver Aspen Bistro is to employ fresh ingredients, a practice conducive not only to health-consciousness but also to food appeal. Many cafeteria-type restaurants use frozen chicken, salmon and vegetables.

One reason Anderson wanted to get into health care was to help change the stereotype that hospitals, schools and nursing homes serve low-quality food. Even the former PVMC café and dining room used some frozen and precooked ingredients; when Anderson started at the Silver Aspen Bistro, he wanted to "make a difference," so he started incorporating fresh ingredients. Lots of places are improving in that regard, Anderson said, and "It's nice

All About Brighton

**Local
Color**®

magazine



To receive your
copy in the mail,
**subscribe
today!**

- features
- news • events

Satisfaction guaranteed or value of remaining issues will be refunded.

Send form & \$25 payment to
**Local Color, P.O. Box 1006,
Brighton, CO 80601**

Name _____

Date _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

to be part of the big change.”

At the same time, the Bistro was nine months away from moving to the new PVMC location, where it was able to expand. It was in the basement of a small building that Anderson did not think could serve many people in a timely fashion.

The Bistro has been getting busier over the years and gets busy every day now, especially around lunchtime, when a lot of locals comprise probably 20-30 percent of clientele, Anderson said. The dining room just added more tables and still needs more, he points out, especially since PVMC just added to its medical complex and is therefore expecting more cafeteria use.

The busiest days are Tuesdays, Wednesdays, and Thursdays. A made-to-order salad – buffalo chicken, steak, salmon, and grilled chicken Caesar are popular preferences – is offered on Tuesdays. On Wednesdays, the Bistro offers specialty items, such as meats carved to order and thai rice bowls, for which



Chef Mike cooks during a 2013 demonstration at Platte Valley Medical Center.

Local Color file photo

customers may choose their proteins (meats), rice (white or brown), then sauce (peanut, tamarind, or coconut curry) on a bed of fresh, sautéed

vegetables, topped with green slaw and peanuts.

People seem to enjoy the freedom of choice, as well as quality, that the Silver Aspen offers. Check out the Bistro's menus at www.pvmc.org under the Patient and Visitor tab, or visit the cafeteria Monday through Friday between 11 a.m. and 2 p.m.

By incorporating nutrition, freshness, variety, and some creativity from the chef in its affordable, simple menu items, The Silver Bistro can perhaps cater to everyone. ●

Butternut Squash Bisque • PVMC Web, Bistro recipe

Yield: 4 servings

- 2 tablespoons canola oil
- 1 medium onion chopped
- 1 rib celery chopped
- 2 clove garlic minced
- 1 bayleaf
- ½ teaspoon ground ginger
- ½ teaspoon fresh cracked black pepper
- ½ teaspoon nutmeg
- 3½ pounds butternut squash peeled, seeded and chopped into one inch pieces
- 2 14½-ounce cans reduced sodium chicken or vegetable broth
- ½ cup milk

Heat oil in a heavy saucepan; add onions, celery, and garlic. Sauté 5 minutes until vegetables are soft but not brown. Add squash, broth, and spices. Cover and cook until the squash is tender – about 25 min. Remove from heat and puree in small batches in a blender. CAUTION: when pureeing, slightly vent the top of the blender and use a pulsing motion (quick on-off). This will prevent the walls and ceiling of your kitchen from turning a wonderful squash color. Or puree in the pot with a wand blender. After the soup is pureed add the milk and reheat.

Nutrition per 2 cup serving

Calories 400 | Fat 15g | Sat. fat 3g | Cholesterol 5mg |
Sodium 160 mg | Carbs 60 g | Fiber 16g | Protein 14g