

From the Burlington Free Press

Chef Robert Barral is the man behind a growing food mecca in Brandon

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BRANDON — For first-rate mashed potatoes, skim the foam off the water while the potatoes, plain old Idahos, are cooking, says Robert Barral.

When cooking beans, add salt at the end, he suggests. This way the beans maintain their shape and stay closed. If you salt them early, the beans will open and release their starch.

No need to measure salt, but best not to shake it. Use finger-fulls to avoid an accident with the shaker. With enough practice, you won't make a mistake sprinkling kosher salt into a dish.

Barral, 59, is the man behind a restaurant, bakery and cooking classes in this small town on U.S. 7. He came clean on an error at a recent Monday afternoon class. Making salmon mousse with baked scrod, the French chef omitted a step. He picked up a spoon to amend his ways: tasting the cream cheese/smoked salmon/dill mousse.

"It's really good," he announced, and even cracked a small smile.

You can take his word for it, or mine, or any of the dozen or so people who attended Barral's late-August cooking demonstration.

The mousse was really good. So was the fish he served it with — steamed under parchment paper before baking, thereby ensuring the fish held its moisture and flavor. The lentils Barral salted late became lentil curry stew, a wonderful complement to the fish and mashed potatoes, made without butter.

"I like to enjoy my mashed potatoes knowing it's not going to do damage to my body," Barral said. "Or my customer's body."

Barral's customers are diners at Café Provence, a casual and welcoming French bistro on Center Street in Brandon. In this environment — walk in off the street in your jeans and sneakers, or put on your party clothes — Barral and his staff serve meals that match any outfit.

Pizzas and burgers share a menu with seafood stew, a double duck dish and braised veal. Customers come from surrounding towns — and beyond — to eat at Barral's open-kitchen restaurant. Barral is a former chef-instructor at New England Culinary Institute, who is familiar to Burlington diners from his time at NECI Commons. He left that Church Street restaurant (now occupied by Urban Outfitters) and opened Cafe Provence in July 2004.

No less an authority than artist Warren Kimble, a Brandon resident, credits Barral with adding to the “creative spark” of the community.

“Chef Robert at the cafe,” Kimble said, “that’s art.”

Barral sort of stumbled upon the Brandon restaurant — a fortuitous event he had never planned on, or even desired.

“To tell you the truth, I never wanted to have a restaurant,” Barral said. “My students were my life. I love them.”

His former wife, also from the south of France, was interested in opening a little store. But the space became, instead, a restaurant whose design Barral sketched on a piece of paper five months before opening his restaurant.

“When I started the restaurant, for me it was an extension of my educational life,” Barral said. “Having a restaurant is nice and interesting for me — but not enough. I started my cooking classes when we opened.”

In May 2005, less than a year after the cafe opened, the Barrals opened a new food business, Gourmet Provence, a bakery and food shop down the street from the cafe. Along with baked goods, Gourmet Provence sells soups, sandwiches and salads — plus specialty food items and wine. There are tables for sipping coffee and eating (fabulous) croissants or a quick lunch. The bakery makes desserts and breads for the cafe, the cafe provides soups and other dishes for the bakery. Barral and employees carry food between the two businesses.

“I thought, ‘Oh my God, what am I doing,’” Barral said, of the store’s opening. “But it’s such a success. It’s a great synergy.”

The sum total has created a kind of Brandon food mecca, with a range of options from beer at the bar to grab n’ go sandwiches to multi-course French-style dinners. The businesses employ 50 people in season, and 37 people year-round, Barral said.

“Chef Robert is wonderful,” said Steven Zorn, a television writer who lives across the street from Cafe Provence. “He’s made Brandon a destination.”

In January 2011, Barral bought the building that houses his cafe and set about creating a “culinary theater” on its ground floor. This demonstration kitchen, whose construction was completed a year ago, is beautifully functional: open, spare and well-equipped. The teacher at the front of the room is, at once, intent and warm: With few words and efficiency at the stove, he packs in a lot information as he demonstrates his craft.

The space includes a private dining area, where participants in Barral’s Monday cooking classes (his culinary theater audience) are seated at tables to watch the well-paced show unfold, often with a glass of wine to match the meal that ends the class.

The drinks come from Barral's bar in the next room, Center Street Bar. It seems downright American with its U-shaped bar and big-screen TV.

"The only thing missing is a book," Barral said. (Wait a bit: a collaborative effort that will produce a cookbook is in the works.)

Barral's first teaching stint was at age 17, when he taught skiing in the Pyrenees. At his restaurant, New England Culinary Institute graduates and students work the line. Instruction ranges from culinary to career. "When my cooks says I want to open a restaurant I say, 'Are you sure?'" Barral said. "It was definitely a learning experience."

A learning experience — with a side of good food and fun — brought people to Barral's teaching kitchen/private dining room on a recent Monday afternoon. Walking into his class was an immediate change of senses: from the summer streetscape of small-town Vermont to the techniques, tricks, tastes and aromas of French cuisine.

A dozen people, in rapt attention, watched the quiet and efficient Barral flavor his lentils, blend his mousse and occasionally interrupt his stove-top focus with dashes of culinary wisdom.

"One thing I always do in the restaurant," Barral said. "I always have a sauce — white wine, lemon juice, butter." And he added a bit of this mixture to his fish, noting both the resulting "shiny look" and the enhanced flavor.

Dorothy Webber, 77, of Rutland is a regular student in Barral's class. She doesn't eat prepared food, and says she has learned much about cooking from Barral.

"I come because it's just so interesting to watch his techniques, the way he cuts onions and holds his knife," Webber said. "It's his whole personality."

Though it was late August, Lucy and Nicole Leber were celebrating Mother's Day at Barral's cooking — a belated gift from Nicole Leber to her mother.

The Lebers live in Orwell, and are faithful and satisfied customers of Café Provence. Class had barely ended — the last vestiges of hot chocolate bomb with caramel sauce and vanilla ice cream were hanging around — and the Lebers were discussing how Nicole could ever top her 2012 Mother's Day present.

"I thought it was a lot of fun," Lucy Leber said. "I've been coming to this restaurant for years and I love the menu."

Barral had told the class how he wound up opening his restaurant in Brandon — a Rutland County town on U.S. 7 between Middlebury and Rutland. It was, essentially, a matter of chance.

"We were absolutely thrilled that this level of food service and architecture came to Brandon," Lucy Leber said. "This venue is a really nice treat for those of us in the area. It was a roll of the

dice and we're the lucky ones. I've never had a bad meal here, and we come a lot."

It was close to 5:30 p.m. when the class ended. Barral's restaurant opens for dinner at 5. He was working the line that night.

His day had started at about 8 in the morning, he said, to empty the trash at the bakery. Later, he would plan the day's specials before joining his cooks at the stove.

"I am a working man, I am a thinking man, I am a cleaning man," he said. "This is definitely my life. I love it."

A few nights later we ate at Café Provence, enjoying the ambiance and the excellent dinner specials (grilled salmon with basil-pesto cream sauce; ribeye steak with crumbled Vermont blue cheese and red wine sauce, served with mashed potatoes, crunchy carrots and pencil-thin asparagus; plus a dynamite, drive-to-Brandon-for Caesar salad). We enjoyed, as well, the company of Barral, who talked with us at the kitchen-facing bar where we ate. We chatted as his bistro filled up, before Barral donned his chef's hat to take his place at the stove.

Our conversation ranged from the restaurant business (he enjoys breakfast at Henry's Diner after his shooting his early-morning cooking show on local TV; to his classic Citroen (French car for a French chef); to the outpouring of community support that helped him in the early days.

"I was hoping it would work," Barral said, "but I wasn't expecting this."