

A chef for all seasons (and diets)

How a dietitian-cum-chef learned to blend nutrition and taste to perfection *by Evan Noetzel*

If you think of the foodservice industry as a linear assembly line, in which food moves predictably from grower to distributor to vendor to restaurant to consumer, then the dining concept that Laura Pensiero promotes—and personifies—is a striking new paradigm for the way we eat and think about food.

In Rhinebeck, N.Y., a village community in the Hudson Valley approximately 90 miles due north of New York City, Pensiero is chef-owner of Gigi Trattoria. There, with executive chef Wilson Costa, she plates Mediterranean fare made from the valley's "very best seasonal ingredients"—a claim supported by the fact that in nearby Red Hook, N.Y., she also operates (and occasionally sources from) Gigi Market, a year-round, indoor retail venue and seasonal farmers' market for local growers and food producers. Add to those operations her growing catering division, and you've got Gigi Hudson Valley (www.gigihudsonvalley.com)—the three-pronged foodservice business that is in many ways an extension of Pensiero herself, or perhaps, a culmination of her unique career path.

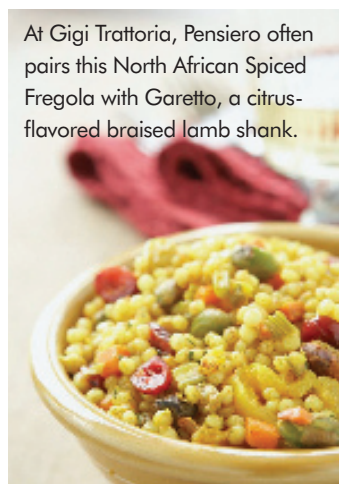
Connecting the dots

After establishing herself as a registered dietitian (a role in which she primarily oversaw dietary planning for individuals with pre-existing health problems), Pensiero's desire to focus instead on *preventive* nutrition compelled her to get into the kitchen and study culinary arts at the French Culinary Institute in New York City, from which she graduated in 1992. Since then, she has been refining her distinct skill set and leaving her mark on the industry as an author, consultant and restaurateur.

"It all really does come back to food and health," she says. "For me, it was going from a total clinical world in nutrition to the French Culinary Institute and then through a 15-year journey after that, working in all sorts of disciplines. Some of them just involved working with great chefs and doing their recipes, and it was purely about the culinary sense. And then, in other situations, I was working mainly in the clinical world, and I've always been looking for how these experiences are going to converge. It's been a real low-burn, slow-grade journey, but I feel like in the last couple of years, I'm



Laura Pensiero, chef-owner,
Gigi Trattoria, Rhinebeck, N.Y.



At Gigi Trattoria, Pensiero often pairs this North African Spiced Fregola with Garetto, a citrus-flavored braised lamb shank.



Gigi Trattoria,
Rhinebeck,
N.Y.

connecting all the dots."

At Gigi Trattoria and Just Salad, Pensiero's small, New York-based fast-food chain specializing in customizable gourmet salads, this connection between nutritional value and culinary inspiration has been manifested in meals that appeal to health nuts and foodies alike. For Pensiero, it seems, the dual role of chef and nutritionist is a natural fit. In fact, she says, "If I do have any internal conflict, it's not at all between the culinary side of me and the nutrition side; it's [between] my business and nutrition sides."

Yet, Pensiero has even managed to turn this supposed inner conflict into a one-woman system of checks and balances. For instance, while the restaurateur in her feels compelled to menu certain items and portion sizes

to meet customer expectations, the nutritionist in her still questions serving a 12-ounce steak with a side of her Tuscan fries. So, to break this impasse, she strikes a balance: The items remain on the menu, but, despite the extra cost, she cooks her fries in peanut oil, and despite the extra (non-sales) time, she trains her waitstaff to walk diners through the finer points of the menu and to readily encourage them to share dishes, including entrées like that steak.

"Above all, we try to get people to have a full eating experience," she says. "When guests know portion sizes, they can make a better decision for the table. I think sharing is more economical for them, and also, I'm happy because they've tasted a lot more of the dishes on our menu."

Down in the valley

Portion control through communal dining is just one of the many topics Pensiero covers in her upcoming cookbook, *Hudson Valley Mediterranean: The Gigi Good Food Cookbook*, scheduled for publication by Harper Collins later this year. The book's subtitle speaks to her philosophy that "good food" must focus on taste, quality and ingredients and "just happen to be healthy"—the defining characteristics, she says, that make the Mediterranean diet a "pleasurable, sensual and enjoyable way to eat healthy."

With her restaurant, farmers' market and catering business, Pensiero has carved out a home in upstate New York for those who appreciate *good* Mediterranean food. Her cookbook, she hopes, will be a means to share that passion with a wider audience, in story form and in recipes that can be replicated at home, allowing for ingredient substitutions based on what's available to the reader. Yet, much more than a collection of her favorite recipes, the cookbook is also Pensiero's love letter to the "culinary and agricultural breadbasket" that is the Hudson Valley.

"There's a 400-year history of farming in this area. ... It's an ideal three-season climate, so you get a rich diversity in product. It's amazing, and it brings about a thrill in eating and—this, I think, is really important—getting people reinvested in the mystique and thrill of looking forward to seasons," she says.

Hudson Valley may be an ideal spot for starting a dialogue about healthy, seasonal eating—especially given its ranks of locavores, its many innovative farms and its close proximity to the New York City market—but Pensiero stresses that this conversation can and should be happening on a national level.

"I would like to see better communication between chefs and farmers and health professionals and public-health advocates and land-conservancy groups, so that people are talking to each other and really protecting what is valuable to them in their communities," she says, adding, "I really want to be a facilitator in that because I feel like I can speak to all those disciplines—and I like that, I like that role of middleman." 