

Secret Kitchens: A Slice of Richmond's Underground Food Scene

rvamag.com/eatdrink/secret-kitchens-a-slice-of-richmonds-underground-food-scene.html

David Streever



A wood-fired pizzeria that operates out of a back alley, a Spanish chef who serves rich soups and flan from her Fan neighborhood apartment, and a mystery baker whose oatmeal chocolate chip cookie puts your grandmother's recipe to shame are some of the best-kept secrets in Richmond's underground food culture. These unconventional business models may not attract investors, but scores of satisfied customers keep coming back for their delicious cooking.

These chefs operate just outside of the law, but follow meticulous cleaning and food safety protocols in their kitchens. It's not legal to make commercial food at home, outside of a few exceptions managed by the Department of Agriculture, so these cooks fly under the radar and avoid traditional marketing. For legal reasons, we've used pseudonyms throughout the article to mask their identities; Pizza Tony, Yvette, and Chip will be the aliases for our cooks.

All of our chefs started because they saw a need for their cooking. Pizza Tony didn't hold back when he described the local pies. "There was no good pizza delivery here," he said. "It was all garbage."

With 25 years of experience in the restaurant industry, many of those as executive chef at high-end restaurants, Tony has high standards for cooking. He's tinkered extensively to produce the pizza he wants to eat, chasing the feeling he had at a little family-run pizzeria he went to when he lived in New Jersey.

His first version was made with a simple yeast-based dough, but after tasting a pizza made

with the more traditional method of naturally leavened dough, he switched to a sourdough culture that lives inside his refrigerator. The process lets him make dough with a minimum of ingredients, “just salt, flour, and water,” he said, but the technique is more time-intensive than using baker’s yeast, rising over a five-day period.

If that sounds a little obsessive, Tony acknowledged that, but said it’s just part of who he is, adding, “It’s just my nature, when I dive into something, I have to do it perfectly.”



As his recipes got more serious, he got tired of working around the limitations of his home oven. Proper pizza is made at extremely high temperatures, which produces a light exterior char while leaving the interior of the crust chewy and springy. “Char is one of the unique characteristics of Neapolitan-style pizza,” he said. Although he’s not making strictly Neapolitan pizza, it was important to him to make the crust taste like you’d expect if you grew up eating pizza in New York or New Jersey.

The solution was an outdoor Fontana Forni wood-fired oven, which can achieve the 800-degree temperature needed for the perfect crust. He operates the oven once a month for his pop-ups, from spring to fall, with a choice of two or three pies that must be ordered in advance on account of the long rising period.



Classic Margherita

Most of the pizzas use a mixture of Grana Padano and mozzarella, with a percentage of buffalo milk, for cheese, over a crushed tomato base. There's always one vegetarian option and an adventurous option, like a mashed potato and bacon pizza adapted from OTTO

Enoteca Pizzeria in the West Village. He likes to experiment, and is hoping to incorporate cheeses that can't currently be imported, and other specialty ingredients from Europe that an above-board pizzeria can't serve in America.

Tony's advertising is all word of mouth, and sometimes, a matter of recruitment. "I work in the food industry still, so we talk about food. If I think someone might be interested, I let them know." From there, a potential customer signs up for announcements via an anonymous social media channel, and when the day comes, they just drive up, grab the pizza and go.

Unlike our other chefs, it's not about the cost-savings or putting aside money for a brick-and-mortar spot. "My creative outlet has always been cooking at home," Tony said, even when he worked in restaurants. "I wanted to do something truly underground, to be the best pizzeria in Richmond but not even have a location. It's never to make it into a regular business. It has to be fun."

For Yvette and Chip though, the cost was the major factor. Commercial kitchen spaces cost roughly \$1,000 a month in Richmond, although pricing structures vary. Both hope to turn their home kitchen businesses into fully above-board operations, although they have very different visions for their future businesses.

Yvette is the nearest to commercial legitimacy, having begun the build-out of her Wooden Spoon Cafe in the space that used to be occupied by Lulabelle's Cafe. She has owned take-out eateries and worked as a private chef, and traces her interest in food back to childhood. "I grew up going to the markets with my grandma, and then cooking with her," she said over tea in her Fan neighborhood apartment. "My first cake I made alone, I was seven, it was from a box, but I was so proud of it."



Yvette's tomato soup

She got up early in the morning to bake the cake to surprise her still-sleeping parents with. She brought it into their bedroom and dropped it, but it all worked out in the end. “We still ate it, and it was delicious,” she said, finishing her story with the big smile and silver lining thinking that ran through all of our conversations.

A lot has changed for her in the decades since she made that cake, but maybe the biggest difference is her choice of ingredients. Like Tony, she doesn't use pre-mixed elements. “If I can avoid it, I only use things I make,” she said. She uses whole vanilla beans over vanilla extract, which go into her Spanish style flan. “It's Spanish-style, not Cuban, [because] I don't use condensed milk. I use my own mix of heavy cream and milk. That's just the way I cook, with pure, simple ingredients.”

Beyond the ingredients, she said the atmosphere matters too. "The energy is important," she said, reflecting on her career. "I've worked in a lot of professional kitchens. The cussing, the screaming, it's a no-no. The food picks up the anger."



Yvette's old chalkboard menu

Yvette cooked Italian cuisine for her Miami-based take-out eatery before selling the operation to work as a private chef for three years. Increasingly frequent hurricanes pushed her to leave Miami, and she ended up in Richmond last December, drawn to live closer to her adult daughter. Not knowing anyone, she joined the neighborhood social media site NextDoor, where she began advertising her homemade soups, brownies, and flan.

“I didn’t know anyone here, so I went to NextDoor, and it’s been wonderful,” she said. She found friends and customers right from the start, she said, adding, “I made 20 soups the first week, the next, 45.” That’s about the maximum she can do in her small, spartan kitchen, but it’s enough to raise the funds for her upcoming expansion.



Spanish-style flan

The goal for the space is to be “just as friendly and warm to everyone as Richmond has been to me,” she said, listing a menu of salads, sandwiches, a single daily special, and of course, her soups.

Her current repertoire of soups are classics—potato leek, tomato, cream of mushroom—but always with a flavor twist that’s unexpected yet obvious in hindsight. Her tomato soup, as an example, has a fresh, almost lemony flavor. I’d never had a tomato soup quite like it before, but now that I’ve tasted it, I’ll always want that fresh citrus flavor.

Like Yvette, Chip is also operating his business from home as a way to bootstrap his next step. Chip’s cookies developed naturally from a recipe his mother-in-law used that resulted in tasty but malformed cookies.

“I called them crackies. They tasted great, but they didn’t hold together on the pan, they came out just kind of smooshed,” Chip told me at his home as we sampled a batch fresh from the oven.

He’s just as obsessive as Tony in his preparations. He said if a batch comes out wrong, he’ll make it again—and again. “I’ll throw out two or three batches if they aren’t good. I only get one shot to impress somebody with my food,” he said.



Freshly-formed balls of cookie dough

Like craft brewers, one of his main inspirations, Chip wants to grow his business but keep it close to home, too. He said he doesn’t want to distribute them to local cafes either. “I worry that they could be sold past the freshness point. When that happens, it’s a waste of money for the producer and the retailer,” he said.

He's running the business now in his spare time, mostly doing free catering jobs to stay on the legal side of the law, but he's hoping to go legit quickly and expand to pop-ups, brewery food trucks, and festivals. "I have something people want, I just have to figure out how to get it to them in a way that's legal, safe, and cost-effective," he said. His plan is to partner with a brewery and food truck to share their approved kitchen space.

Customers find out about him through referrals, usually after trying one of his cookies at a party, where the cookies are served in logo-stamped food-safe envelopes. He's had requests to cater weddings, birthday parties, and other celebrations from friends, family members, and even a few strangers.

Making cookies at home and giving them away for free is legal, Chip noted, but he defended health inspections. "The intention is to protect consumers," he said about the regulations. Despite not being required, he still follows a strict protocol that he describes as necessary.

"I vacuum first, then shower and change into fresh clothes. I'm intentional about cleanliness," he said, detailing a time-intensive but small portion of his overall regiment. Like Yvette and Tony, his pantry is well-stocked with commercial cleaning products and supplies, and metal surfaces in his kitchen gleam.

Neither Yvette nor Chip were particularly worried about being caught. Chip is transitioning his operation to an entirely legal venue as this article comes out, and Yvette was confident that she'd be able to handle any restrictions or regulations, and is also close to moving to her fully-certified and inspected kitchen space.

For Pizza Tony and his fans—this writer included—the consequences would be dire. "I'd have to re-evaluate what it's about, what I'm trying to do," he said. "The best part about this is when people pick up a 6-pack from the store down the street, get their pizza, and just go eat it down by the river."

Editor's Note: All names have been obfuscated to protect the anonymity of the sources.