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ROOTS

Summer Camp

A pair of New England Patriots gets a hands-on lesson in Italian cooking.

Text and Photography by
Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli

Joe Vellano, left and Jonas Gray.

“My Nonna was from Calabria. We called her Owa, but her real name was Pasqualina Gillotti. Owa was a name that I invented because I could not pronounce ‘nonna’ when I was a young boy,” says Sean Stellato, an NFL sports agent who represents several athletes, including New England Patriots Super Bowl champs Joe Vellano and Jonas Gray.

Called the “Jerry Maguire of Boston,” Stellato is well known for taking special care of his players. He recently enrolled Vellano and Gray in a cooking class at the Cooking Vacations Boston test kitchen.

Rolling up their sleeves, they joined Stellato, my sister Gina Cohen-Birmingham, and me in preparing a healthy and balanced Mediterranean menu, starting with stuffed red bell peppers; pasta with capers and black olives; fish in a caper, black olive and basil sauce; and a chocolate nut cake. We start with hands-on basics.

Vellano and Gray, who want to learn a few things about the healthy

Mediterranean diet, are slicing, dicing and cooking up a storm with Stellato. During the class, we’ll offer them an olive oil tasting, too, with extra virgin first-cold pressed, lemon and chili pepper, all produced by Cooking Vacations.

Stellato looks up from his chopping. “Cooking is amazing, and it brings back a lot of memories of being with my nonna in her kitchen. I remember my grandmother making the seven fish—stuffed squid and lobster, pasta, gnocchi and her famous polpetta di melanzane, bite size rounds of eggplant and Parmesan cheese,” he says. He takes a moment to show me his grandmother’s Calabrian cookbook.

Vellano’s family is from Sora and Sicily; Stellato’s family is from Calabria and want to return to their roots and learn healthy recipes that will fuel professional athletes. Gray just loves pasta—a sentiment shared by millions.

Stellato and I share our nonnas’ recipes while reminiscing about growing up in an Italian American family. Great students, they’re funny too



CHERRY TOMATOES
chopped into quarters

—Vellano and Gray call each other “meatball.”

Though he towers over Gina and me—about three times our size—Vellano talks softly. When we ask him if he learned anything with his Italian mamma, he said no, that she cooks for him. Like any good Italian son, he shows us a photo of his mom, Joanie Lombardo, taken on the day the Patriots won the Super Bowl. He brags about his mom's lasagna, her tons of pasta, chicken cutlets and the seven fishes at Christmas. He has a big family with grandmothers, aunts, cousins and more cousins—a close family, too. After his cooking class, we hope Vellano will cook for his mom.

The guys plan to visit Italy this year before training camp for on-site cooking classes, touring and eating Mediterranean style.

Stellato knows what it takes to play ball. He is a former professional football player and author of *No Backing Down: The Story of the 1994 Salem High School Football Team*, a true story about his 1994 Salem, Mass. football team and its improbable run to the Northeastern Conference title amidst a teachers' strike.

“I wanted to stay close to the game,” says Stellato. “Growing up with football was like a religion. I walked away with a couple of concussions and one bout of surgery. So it came down to coaching or being on the business side.”

After seeing the 1996 film *Jerry Maguire*, Stellato started to network and hit it off with a couple of his former teammates who needed representation. “I thought there was a void in personal attention. A lot of agents never played ball, so being on both sides of the fence gave me a dimension that others did not have. I experienced my first Super Bowl this year—it was almost surreal. If you are passionate in life, you will succeed at it,” he says.

“I am a proud Italian American, and my relationship with my clients is like family,” he adds. “This attribute comes from my Italian heritage and how Italians pride themselves on the value of their family along with their ability to cook. I cherish my nonna's recipes and cook regularly.”

Stellato knows the history of his roots, too. “Calabrian cooking is a mix of fish and meat due to its geographic position both on the sea and near to the mountains. My grandparents came from Calabria, near to Cosenza, home of the chili pepper. There's even a festival there every year that celebrates the red hot pepper with a museum, too. Known as the heel of Italy, Calabria is home to a healthy Mediterranean diet,” he says.

The conversation is the type that takes place when families and friends gather in the kitchen to prepare a meal.

Stellato explains his appreciation of the role good food plays in professional sports. “You're playing at the highest level of the elite; therefore, proper nutrients are important. Pastas are something that Joe and Jonas cherish in pre-game meals. You are what you eat! They have to have this down to a science so they can perform at peak levels,” he says.

Gina steps away from the stove and passes some homemade Italian bread and the Cooking Vacations olive oil. “It's extra virgin and first-cold pressed. The virgin means the oil was extracted from the very first pressing, cold-pressed means no heat was used, and DOP (Denominazione di Origine Protetta) means it has an ‘origin protected’ domain of production. Ours is a Made In Italy product and has the official stamp of approval. Grown under the warm Mediterranean sun, in rich volcanic soil and with salty sea winds, our olive oil is made with Leccino, Curatoria, Frantoio and Coratina olives. These four varieties give

Southern Italy Mediterranean Pasta

- 1 pound organic dry rigatoni
- 2 red bell peppers, organic
- Garlic, 1 to 2 cloves
- 1 cup black and green Gaeta olives, pitted
- 1 cup red cherry tomatoes, chopped into quarters
- Extra virgin olive oil
- 2 tablespoons capers, washed well and drained
- 1 bunch basil, organic
- 1 handful fresh chopped parsley
- Sea salt and rose pepper, to taste
- Parmigiano Reggiano, to taste

Chop the red bell peppers julienne and cut again, making them into small pieces. Clean the garlic and smash it. Cut the olives into small pieces. Cut the cherry tomatoes into quarters.

Warm a few swirls of extra virgin olive oil in a round beveled pan. Add the garlic, tomatoes, red peppers, olives, capers, basil and parsley.

“You're playing at the highest level of the elite; therefore, proper nutrients are important.”

— Sean Stellato

an excellent quality of oil that has a very low acidity, excellent for Mediterranean cooking,” she says.

The olives are grown on a small olive orchard, tenderly grown throughout the summer, picked just at the right time and pressed immediately on cold stones. Gina asks if anyone has questions, and Vellano and Gray ask if they can have more.

“I just love Italian food,” says Gray. “I love how there are hundreds of recipes and how everyone has their own way of doing it, and with such simplicity. I love Italian bread dunked in olive oil.”

The players work out eight hours per day in a combination schedule that includes strength training, weight lifting, stretching, yoga, and speed training, in addition to film study. Nutrition is key, but that doesn't mean there's not room for dessert.

The chocolate cake comes out of the oven, and a few minutes later it is cut and served. Everyone has seconds and ends on a high note.

“If we bring home another Super Bowl, will you and Gina cook for us again?” Vellano asks. I guess he liked our food, but, best of all, these guys love cooking Italian!

Salt and pepper to taste. Let the ingredients melt together on low heat for approximately 10 minutes.

Meanwhile, in a large pasta pan heat the water and salt to taste; bring to a boil. When the water boils, put the pasta in the pan and cook until al dente. Just as the pasta is ready to be drained, reserve a cup or two of the pasta water and set aside.

Drain the pasta, then toss it into the pan with the sauce. Mix ingredients together, adding a little of the pasta water so it is not too dry. Add Parmigiano Reggiano cheese to taste. Cook another minute on the stove. Plate and serve, drizzling a little extra virgin olive oil on top.

Makes 4 servings.

Stuffed Red Bell Peppers

- 12 red bell peppers, organic
- 1 pound lean ground sirloin and ¼ pound ground veal (you can opt to use only ground sirloin)
- 2 to 3 slices of day-old country Italian bread with the crust removed
- ½ cup almond milk for soaking the bread
- ½ cup Gaeta black olives without the pits, chopped
- 1 heaping handful of fresh parsley, washed



- and finely chopped
- $\frac{1}{8}$ cup red wine
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Sea salt, to taste
- Rose pepper, to taste

Preheat the oven to 325°F. Wash the peppers well, pat dry and cut in half, removing all the seeds. Put the peppers on a baking sheet lined with parchment paper and bake for a few minutes, until they turn soft. Remove the peppers from the oven.

Put the meat in a large mixing bowl. Soak the bread in the almond milk until wet. Blend the bread and milk with your hands until the bread breaks apart. Make a well in the meat; add bread mixture and all remaining ingredients; mix well.

Scoop the stuffing into each pepper, not packing it in, and level off. Place the peppers back onto the parchment-lined baking sheet and bake for 25 minutes or until done. Serve warm.

Makes 12 servings.

Chocolate Rum Cake

- 10 tablespoons butter, plus extra for greasing the pan
- 1 cup light brown sugar, divided
- 5 large eggs, preferably organic and cage-free
- Zest of 1 lemon
- $2\frac{1}{4}$ cups almond flour
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups dark chocolate, melted then cooled until just barely warm
- $\frac{1}{3}$ cup hazelnut or coconut flour
- 1 teaspoon baking powder
- 1 tablespoon rum
- Powdered sugar, for dusting

Preheat the oven to 350°F.

Cream the butter with $\frac{3}{4}$ cup of the light brown sugar until light and fluffy.

Separate the egg yolks from the whites, set aside egg whites in a separate bowl. Add the

yolks, one by one, to the butter mixture, mixing between each addition. Continue to whip for several more minutes until light. Add the zest, almond flour and melted chocolate, stirring gently in the same direction.

In a separate bowl, whip the egg whites with the remaining light brown sugar until they form stiff peaks.

Gently fold egg whites into the chocolate-almond mixture, always in the same direction. Sift together the hazelnut or coconut flour and baking powder and add to the mixture. Add the rum. Stir gently.

Butter and flour a 9-inch round cake pan and pour in the mixture. Bake about 40 minutes. Test with a toothpick for doneness, then remove from oven and allow to cool completely.

Turn out of the baking pan onto a serving dish and dust with powdered sugar. You may serve with a scoop of vanilla gelato, if desired.

Makes 8 servings



Eggplant Puffs

- 1 pound eggplant
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups Parmesan cheese, grated
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- 2 tablespoons extra virgin olive oil
- Pinch of dried oregano
- Sprig of parsley, finely chopped
- Salt and pepper, to taste
- Bread crumbs for dusting
- Olive oil for frying

Boil the eggplants whole, peel, then in a large bowl, squash the flesh into a pulp. Add all other ingredients, except bread crumbs and olive oil for frying. Mix well. Using your hands, shape small balls (size of golf ball) and roll in bread crumbs.

Deep-fry in olive oil. Once golden brown, remove from oil and drain on paper towels. Serve hot.

Makes 4 servings.



Potato Pie

- 1 pound potatoes, your choice, skin on
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups grated Parmesan cheese, divided
- $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups salame or cooked ham, diced
- 2 large eggs, beaten
- $\frac{1}{4}$ teaspoon salt
- $\frac{1}{8}$ teaspoon black pepper
- Pinch of dried oregano
- Sprig of parsley, finely chopped
- Bread crumbs for lining the dish and as a topping, about $1\frac{1}{2}$ cups

Preheat the oven to 325°F.

Boil the potatoes in abundant salted water. Once cooked and while still warm, peel and put them through a potato ricer. Place in a bowl, add all the other ingredients, except bread crumbs and a little of the cheese for topping, and mix well with a fork.

Grease an oven dish with oil and line with bread crumbs. Add the potato mixture, top with cheese and bread crumbs, and bake about 20 minutes. Allow to cool slightly and serve warm.

Makes 4 servings.

Lauren Birmingham Piscitelli is founder and owner of Cooking Vacations Italy which specializes in culinary tours, hands-on cooking classes and cultural adventures in Italy. www.cooking-vacations.com, (617) 247-4112