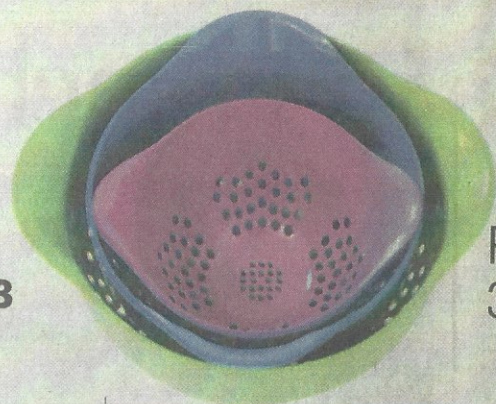


FOOD

Gracie's Cafe opens in Worcester. **Table Talk, F3**



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Thursday, Aug. 30, 2012 ★ Section F

SJ

He put heart, soul into perfect pastry

Gil Ortale “was kind of in a tailspin.” Then he set to work “mastering this thing of beauty.”

By Catherine Laughlin
FOR THE INQUIRER

For those unfamiliar with Gil Ortale — or rather, with his quest to bake the perfect French canelé (pronounced cahn eh LAY) — it's the story of a local guy who in his midlife years not only established his métier in pastry, but also became absorbed in an endeavor that saved his soul.

Ortale, who held a number of cooking and other jobs in the city over the last three decades, had been out of work and struggling till he started baking the obscure French pastry.

“I was kind of in a tailspin,” he says. “I had to work at mastering this thing of beauty. And there was a real redemptive part of it.”

The cooking tale goes back to when Ortale was an undergraduate at Temple University in the early '80's when he started at the famed Steve Poses' Frog restaurant at 15th and Locust, where he rose through the ranks.

“I went from chopping garlic to being promoted as a chef,” says Ortale, now 55, who grew up in the city's Northeast and now lives in Bella Vista.

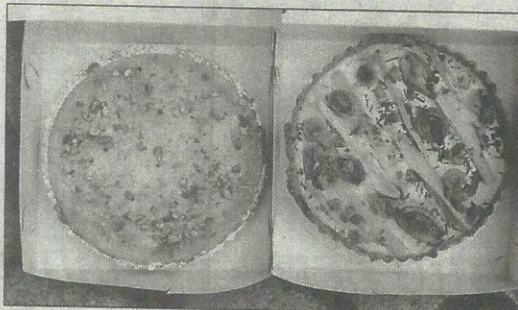
See **PASTRY** on F2



Gil Ortale sells his canelés — \$5 for two regulars or six minis — at farmers markets and coffee shops. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer



Cook finds his niche in French pastry



Stone Fruit and Ricotta Tart

Makes 8 servings

For the shell:

1 1/4 cups flour
1/2 cup sugar
1 tablespoon salt
1 tablespoon leaf lard
1/3 cup unsalted butter
1/4 cup ice water
1 8-inch tart pan
1 pound dried beans or rice for blind baking
4 large eggs, divided use
For the filling:
1 1/2 cups of stone fruit (rip-

ened peaches work well this time of year)
Seeds stripped from the center of 2 vanilla beans
2 cups of ricotta cheese
1 ounce of rum
2 ounces heavy cream
1/4 cup apricot jam
1 ounce shelled pistachios chopped
Confectioner's sugar for dusting

For the shell:

1. Preheat oven to 375 degrees. Put flour (reserving 2 tablespoons), salt, and 2 tablespoons of sugar in a bowl. Cover and place in freezer for 30 minutes. Place lard in freezer for five minutes.
2. Cut butter into 8 to 10 pieces.
3. Remove dry ingredients and lard from freezer. Scatter butter and lard over dry ingredients. Blend mixture with a pastry cutter until it resembles coarse meal. Do not overmix.
4. Sprinkle 1/4 cup of icy water over mixture and stir mixture with a rubber spatula. Scrape the sides. Dough should form a ball. If not, add a bit more water.
5. When ball forms, knead by hand for 15 seconds. Divide ball into halves, wrap each in clear plastic. Refrigerate for at least an hour. (The dough will hold in the refrigerator for five days.)
6. Remove dough from refrigerator. Press, squeeze and shape dough on a lightly floured surface until it is a four-inch circular disc.
7. With a rolling pin, roll dough into a 10-inch diameter, turning and flipping.
8. Center dough over tart pan. Lay it into the pan. Press it into the corners and trim off excess dough. Refrigerate for 30 minutes.
9. Remove pan from refrigerator. Line shell with parchment or foil. Fill shell with dried beans. Be sure that the dough is still lining the pan.
10. Bake shell on a sheet pan for 20 minutes or until edges are slightly browned. Remove beans and foil. Return to oven for five minutes. Then cool.
11. Beat one egg; pour over cooled shell; coat thoroughly with pastry brush. Place in oven for 5 minutes. Then cool.

For the filling:

1. Blanch fruit in boiling water. Transfer fruit to ice water. After 2 minutes, skin should slide off. Slice fruit from pit.
2. Place vanilla beans and ricotta cheese in mixing bowl and blend on medium-low speed. Blend in remaining sugar.
3. Add 3 eggs, 2 tablespoons flour, rum and cream to mixture. Blend at high speed for one minute.

Assembly and garnish:

1. Preheat oven to 400 degrees.
2. Place fruit in bottom of pan. Pour ricotta mixture over the fruit slowly, spreading evenly.
3. Place tart on center rack. Lower oven to 370 degrees for 20 minutes. If tart isn't browning, rotate pan. Cooking time is 30 to 35 minutes or when tart center is set.
4. When cooled, remove tart with paring knife.
5. In small pan, bring jam and 1 tablespoon of water (or rum) to a simmer until syrupy. Remove from heat.
6. Brush over surface until it glistens. Sprinkle pistachios on top. Sprinkle confectioner's sugar on exposed edges.
7. Refrigerate tart until ready to serve.

Per serving: 589 calories, 26 grams protein, 76 grams carbohydrates, 22 grams sugar, 20 grams fat, 142 milligrams cholesterol, 1,049 milligrams sodium, 15 grams dietary fiber.

PASTRY from F1

He then opened a grill at the Reading Terminal Market in 1985 that lasted three years; profits dwindled and he closed shop. His next endeavor was running the food service operation for Cigna for five years. When the insurance giant farmed out Ortale's department to Aramark, Ortale's position changed, and feeling dissatisfied, he left in 2000.

He then quit food and worked as a headhunter for a medical recruiting firm. The money was good, the hours perfect (he got to work at home), but it didn't work out. Unemployed again, Ortale felt defeated. That was in late August 2001.

"My brother had heard that I lost my job. So he called and said, 'Come on up for the weekend, and we'll go fishing,'" Ortale recalls.

Ortale's brother, Peter, was 37 and living in Manhattan. He was working as a securities broker for Euro Brokers Inc. on the 84th floor of the South Tower of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001. After the first plane hit the North Tower, he headed to the stairwell to leave the building. He never made it.

"The shock of having someone murdered in the prime of his life ... It was tough," Ortale says of the grief he and his family endured.

The next couple of years, Ortale helped a friend make organic candles. He started running, and took up boxing — while fighting a bout of cancer.

When Ortale came across a canelé recipe in the fall of 2008, it intrigued him, in part because he had heard that the pastry was so challenging to make, but also because the preparations for the mold called for 50 percent butter and 50 percent beeswax. And he had all that organic beeswax from the candles.

Very similar in appearance to a miniature Bundt cake, the canelé is a dazzling creation enveloped in a caramelized casing and a custardlike center.

Thought to have originated in the French port city of Bordeaux, the canelé's history is the stuff of folklore. Some say nuns began making them during the 18th century with leftover egg yolks from winemakers, who used the whites to clarify their wines. Another myth has women gathering spilled flour from docks and making the sweet cakes for children.

"The idea of the canelé is almost poetic," says Ortale. He decided to take it on.

"In the beginning, I would literally cry because I was unhappy with the way they would come out." He tried six different recipes before he found one that met his



Gil Ortale talks with customers at the Head House Square Farmers Market, where he sells such as Peach Ricotta with Pistachio, above left, and Chevre, Onion, Pancetta with Herbed Custard. TOM GRALISH / Staff Photographer

standards, and then he set to perfecting his technique.

"Visually, it was important to me that they looked good, and obviously tasted good ... I wanted multilayered tastes. And I wanted them to have a good caramel color."

Ortale says most canelé recipes use cold milk, egg yolks, rum, and flour. He also adds vanilla beans and orange zest. But the real precision lies in the oven temperatures, which Ortale says should be turned up very hot for about 20 minutes with the canelés baking until they start to rise. Then, the temperature should be lowered as the cakes finish baking.

As his technique improved, Ortale started using silicon molds — lightly coating them with beeswax and butter — instead of the copper molds traditionally used by French bakers.

"Some people think the inside should be like thick pudding. I don't. The inside of mine have more of a sponge-like consistency." And he likes his pastry shells to be slightly crisp.

To prevent him from eating the entire dozen each time he baked, his girlfriend, Nem Ngo, who was working at La Croix, took them to work, where they won accolades from Eric Simonis, the French sommelier at the time. "He said they were really close to what he got in France, and that I should sell them. ... That really gave me confidence."

After about six months, he started selling his canelés at Headhouse Farmers Market in Society Hill — "I had French tourists tell me how authentic they were" — and launched his Market Day Canelé operation.

After La Colombe agreed to serve them, his reputation started to build. "Once all the French people in the city learned about them, I had regular customers," he said.

Ortale now bakes more than 2,000 canelés weekly, selling 6 minis or two large for \$5. He has an arrangement with Four Worlds Bakery in West Philadelphia, using their commercial ovens a couple of times a week starting at 9 or 10 p.m.

and going well past day along with his longtime friend and business partner, Nem Ngo. He sells the pastries at area farmers markets Mawr, Chestnut Hill, and in Philadelphia, plus the city Square and Rittenhouse Markets. A handful of grocers in the area also carry them, including Fair Food Farmstand, Aisle Grocery, La Colo Petit Dauphine, Pump and Odd Fellows.

Orders can be placed online at www.marketdaycanele.com.

He has started baking a variety of cookies and tarts, too. "I didn't anticipate a career at this time in my life," he says. "It was born out of desperation."

"I had never been a baker, but the market required passion, technical skill, and sense of beauty," said Ortale. "For me to be able to express my way, it's been very rewarding."