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Appetizer: Maria's House Made Salsas

Hitting the Sauce: Maria's House Made Salsas are now a hot commodity at area markets

BY MOLLY ABRAHAM



When Al Pronko discusses the four salsas he concocted in his Hamtramck restaurant kitchen, you might think he was talking about his daughter, Marie, and son, Fred, because he likes to refer to their order of “birth.” First born, he says, was his mild salsa made with Roma tomatoes. Then came a spicier, roasted-habanero variety; followed by roasted habanero sweetened with fresh mango; and then black bean with roasted corn seasoned with chipotle — all made from fresh ingredients. “They’re just like my kids,” he says. “I have a strong passion for them.”

Maria's House Made Salsa is now on store shelves at Joe's Produce in Livonia, Holiday Market in Royal Oak, as well as Kim's Produce and Honey Bee Market in Detroit. And one more place: Ali Bazzi's Mobil gas station on Caniff just around the corner from the Pronko family restaurant, Maria's Comida.

Bazzi was the first to take the salsa when the family started putting it in jars in November. In fact, he took the jars even before the family commissioned graphic artist Ross Kurtis to make the colorful labels that now grace them.

When Maria's Comida opened three years ago, the fresh salsa, which is made in the kitchen in 16-pound batches, was put out on the tables with tortilla chips as a complimentary appetizer. “We were giving it away,” Al says. “People loved it, and started asking if they could buy it to take home.” So Pronko, who left his chef's job at P.F. Chang's China Bistro to open the restaurant, began researching just what he would have to do to market the salsa. He first contacted the food-science lab at Cornell University and talked to Elizabeth Keller about creating a formula for a 16-pound batch — enough for 16 jars.

He sent her a copy of his recipe for mild salsa, got a formula that could be expanded to larger batches, and learned how to do the thermal process and create a log sheet to monitor temperature, pH level, and lid safety.

For the other three salsas, he worked closer to home, with Michigan State University's food-science lab, where Diane Novak helped him get ready for production and helped calculate the nutrition facts for the labels.

Licensing followed, and Maria's House Made Salsa was approved by the FDA, the Wayne County Health Department, and the Michigan Department of Agriculture.

Pronko makes and bottles the salsas in the tiny kitchen, coming in at 6 a.m. on weekdays before the restaurant opens, and on Sundays when it's closed, to make enough to fill 50 jars, which are hand-labeled with the help of Marie and Fred. He makes one variety at a time “in the order in which they were born.”

Joe's Produce was the first market to take the salsas. Then a customer at Holiday Market asked if they had them. Holiday called Joe's to find out where to get them, and added them to the shelves. Western Market in Ferndale is the latest outlet.

The family also has a table on Saturdays at Eastern Market, where it's usually Marie Pronko offering samples of the product. And she doesn't mind at all when people call her Maria.

Maria's House Made Salsas, Maria's Comida, 11411 Jos. Campau, Hamtramck; 313-733-8406.