

SARATOGA NEWS

185

Saratoga High student creates app that simplifies access to school information  page 5

Vol. 57, No. 50

Tuesday, December 18, 2012

SARATOGA IS ASKING RESIDENTS FOR INPUT ON SAFETY ELEMENT

The document has not been updated since 1987

BY BRIAN BABCOCK

Saratoga is serious about safety.

The city began the process of updating its safety element earlier this year. The purpose of the element, a planning document that is part of the General Plan, is to identify potential natural and human-caused hazards and how to best deal with them, city staff said.

The cost of the update will be paid for through a \$175,000 state of California 2008 Disaster Recovery Initiative grant. The program was formed in response to the presidentially declared national emergency of the 2008 California wildfires.

"The last update to the safety element took place 25 years ago. As someone who has lived in Saratoga for more 31 years, I can tell you that a lot has changed since 1987. I'm pleased that the city is updating the safety element and that we were able to pay for the project using grant funds," Mayor Jill Hunter said.

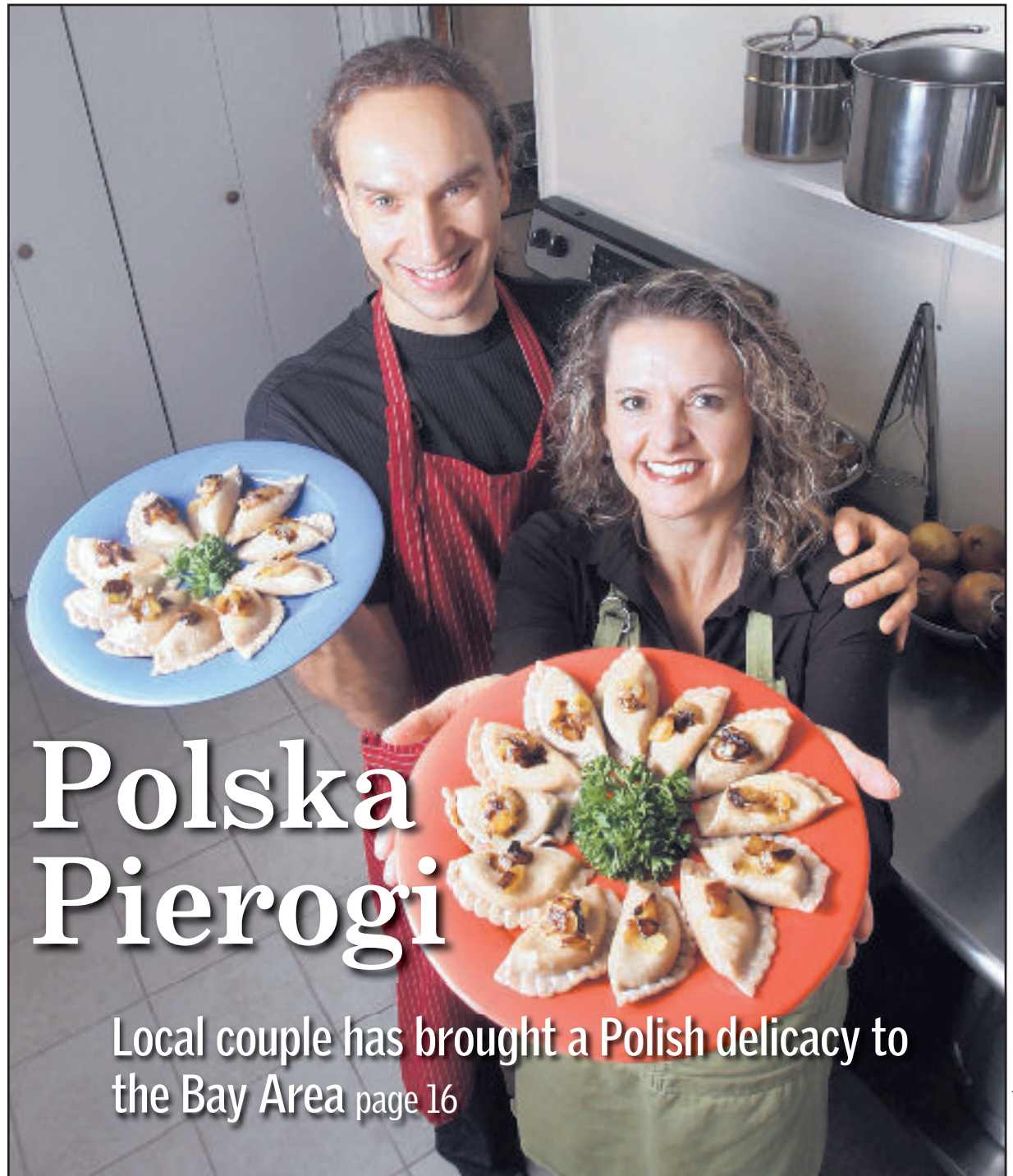
The city has hired RBF Consulting to help update the element. The contract will cost the city \$94,000. Part of the remaining grant funds will be used to update a

Council, page 12



Visit our Special
My Town
News Pages

www.mercurynews.com/my-town



Polska Pierogi

Local couple has brought a Polish delicacy to the Bay Area  page 16

Husband and wife team Tomek and Bridget Piszczek hold up plates of organic potato and farmers cheese, and whole wheat spinach and feta pierogi.

PHOTOGRAPH BY GEORGE SAKKESTAD

A MediaNews Group NEWSPAPER



Preparation of the pierogi is simple, the couple says. Pop the frozen dumplings in boiling water for 8-10 minutes, or brown in a frying pan with a bit of oil for 3-4 minutes. Top with the traditional sautéed onions, or (for a more decadent dish) dip in sour cream, and serve.

From high tech to handcrafted

The Piszczeks gave up their careers to pursue a dream of making pierogi

By MARIANNE L. HAMILTON

Photographs by GEORGE SAKKESTAD

Healthy fast foods. Gourmet Polish foods. Until recently, both phrases might at least have elicited chuckles, if not downright disbelief. But thanks to Saratogans Tomek and Bridget Piszczek, families across the country could soon be sitting down to a meal that's nutritious as well as delicious and can be whipped up

in less than 20 minutes. What's more, the menu will owe its flavors to those first popularized in Poland, circa 1494.

Since 2010, the Piszczeks have been operating Polska Foods, named for Tomek's homeland. Or more precisely, the moniker honors the products the couple handcrafts and distributes throughout the Bay Area: the

savory, divine dumplings called pierogi that are a staple of the Polish diet.

How did a high-tech marketing maven who grew up in the West Valley, and a structural engineer who hails from Lubiechowa, Poland, end up launching a gourmet food company? Their journey began at a Halloween party in 2008.

By the time that particular Oct. 31 rolled around, Bridget had spent a decade in PR and marketing; first at a number of Silicon Valley startups, and then working in the nutrition, wellness and healthcare industry in New York. A confirmed fitness and health nut who has always painstakingly perused labels and consumed only "real" foods,

Bridget was passionate about her work as a health writer and educator.

Amid the ghosts and goblins at a party tossed by mutual friends, she spied a tall, pony-tailed "doctor" in scrubs. He smiled and asked her about all of the gear she was wearing.

Pierogi, page 17



The couple spent a full year seeking out the freshest possible ingredients from local farmers, locating the only organic flour mill in the area, and sampling pounds of farmers' cheeses to make the best pierogi they could.



Tomek Piszczek took his wife to his homeland of Poland after the two were married. After tasting her mother-in-law's pierogi, Bridget had found her calling. 'As I took my first bite, my teeth sank into a soft, warm dough filled with immense flavor,' Bridget says. 'Dumbfounded, I told my husband, This redefines comfort food.'

Pierogi

Continued from page 16

"I told him I was a rock climber, which I've always been really into," Bridget recalls. "We started talking, and it was kind of like 'home' for me: My mom was born in Germany, so I come from a very European family, and Tomek spoke a little German, even though he's Polish. It progressed very quickly from there."

Tomek, who holds a master's in engineering and specializes in renovating aging buildings, had been preparing for a return to Poland. "I'd come to the U.S. in 2004 and ended up in Lake Tahoe. In Poland we don't have so much freedom to go to the mountains, and I love to ski, so I kept thinking I'd stay for one more season, which became another, and another. I was going to go home and start a 'normal' life. And then I met Bridget," Tomek laughs.

Within a year, the Westmont High School (class of 1992) and San Jose State graduate who'd been known as Bridget McQueen became Mrs. Tomek Piszczek. A Christmas trip to her husband's country of birth soon followed. In her mother-in-law's kitchen one frigid day, Bridget was to

find her life's calling.

Tomek's *matka* sat the newlyweds down at her kitchen table, placed in front of them a steaming, fragrant plate of pierogi, and waited expectantly. Seduced by the combined aromas of potatoes, onions, herbs and spices, Bridget was only too happy to tuck into her first-ever Polish dumpling. That initial taste sealed the deal.

"As I took my first bite, my teeth sank into a soft, warm dough filled with immense flavor," Bridget says. "Dumbfounded, I told my husband, 'This redefines comfort food.' It reminded me of how you can show someone you care by offering the most tasty, nourishing food you can make from Mother Earth. That food expressed love."

When the couple returned home, the hunt for pierogi became a priority for Bridget. "All I could think about was how I could get more pierogi in California," she admits. For months she and her husband combed delis and gourmet food stores, but nowhere could they locate dumplings that matched the delicacy and flavors of those made by Tomek's mother. Most importantly for the health-conscious consumers, few labels offered ingredients they wished to ingest.

"Most of the pierogi we tried were stiff and doughy, and used things like potato flakes and other processed stuff. My feeling is, if you get tired halfway through reading through the list of ingredients, that's not something you want to eat," Tomek advises.

Fortunately, Tomek had been making the dietary staple throughout his life on his family's farm—where they raised chickens, kept bees, and ate only locally grown produce and meats—and was delighted to prepare batch after batch for his grateful bride.

Per Polish tradition, the Saratoga couple began sharing the delicacy with loved ones. The response was unanimous: Everyone who sampled the dish asked where they could find more. That's when the Piszczeks decided to go into business as full-time pierogi producers.

"We had our hearts set on doing this," Bridget says. "Then things got really busy, really fast."

The couple was to spend a full year seeking out the freshest possible ingredients from local farmers, locating the only organic flour mill in the area, sampling pounds of farmers' cheeses, and applying for the dizzying array of permits needed to launch their

company.

"In some states," Bridget notes, "people can start a food company and make muffins out of their house, and then it expands. From the first, we kind of made the commitment to go big."

In the early days Tomek and Bridget made their pierogi at a commercial kitchen in San Jose and sold them fresh at a booth at the Campbell Farmers Market. However, their preference for using very low-gluten flour

produced delicate dough, which grew ragged during weighing and wrapping for customers' home consumption. The new Polska Foods executives began flash-freezing their pierogi, rendering them capable of withstanding the rigors of commerce (and being stored for a full year after purchase).

As their booth was selling out each Sunday morning, Bridget, who handles all sales and

Pierogi, page 18

HOLIDAY PIEROGI WITH CARAMELIZED ONIONS

Polish Americans consume pierogi of all flavors year-round. But during the holidays in Poland, cabbage, mushroom and sauerkraut pierogi are the most popular, due to their meatless contents; a requirement for the Christmas Eve meal called Wigilia (the vigil), which honors Catholic tradition. Though the Church's requirements for meat consumption have changed, this menu preference remains.

- Boil or brown the pierogi per package instructions, keep warm
- While pierogi are cooking, slice onion(s) into small, short strips
- In large frying pan, add olive oil to cover bottom
- Add onions to pan, salt to taste
- Cover, slow-cook until onions are warm brown color, stirring to prevent scorching
- Serve with sour cream on the side for dipping

Wesołych Swiat (Merry Christmas) to all!



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF BRIDGET PISZCZEK

The Piszczeks, seen here at the Campbell Farmers Market, now have their pierogis sold at Gene's Fine Foods and Whole Foods, with Trader Joe's and Lunardi's slated to begin sales.

Pierogi

Continued from page 17

marketing for the company, was doing demos for local markets. She and Tomek give a special nod to Duane Chapman, gourmet foods specialist at Gene's Fine Foods in Saratoga, for being not only the first grocer to add the pierogi to his shelves but the entrepreneurs' mentor and adviser.

Says Bridget, "Duane knows everyone, and brought us in and helped us so much. He taught us about what to put on our packaging to entice customers, and how food is sold. He even advised us about where to get permits, and how to get various certifications. There was so much we had to learn as we were getting started, and he and everyone at Gene's were incredibly kind to us."

Chapman has been at the market for 13 years, and says his first sample of the Polska pierogi was a revelation. "I'd never really had a good pierogi before, and these are incredible. They taste so great! There's absolutely no

competition out there. It was the perfect thing to bring to market," says Chapman.

The grocer's input had a direct impact on the simple, colorful product packaging that Bridget designed, which features large photographs of its contents. "We get a lot of great products in here, but due to their appearance they might not sell," Chapman explains. "So Bridget and I worked on the packaging to make sure the pierogi would be seen in the freezer case, even if they get a little frosty. And then once you get a product like this into someone's mouth, they'll definitely come back."

Within months of securing shelf space at Gene's, Whole Foods in Campbell and Los Gatos agreed to carry the Piszczeks' pierogi. "At first they put us on the top shelf in the ice cream section," says Tomek, grinning.

The stores have since shifted the food to a spot in the frozen entrée section, and devote two full shelves to the four varieties of pierogi made by Polska Foods. All Bay Area Whole Foods markets now carry the

pierogi; Trader Joe's, Lunardi's and other specialty food stores are also slated to begin sales.

Such expansion has been made possible through the Piszczeks' new relationship with distributor Tony's Fine Foods. "Before, we were driving around and delivering the pierogi ourselves, which was crazy," says Tomek. "And with the price of gas, it was really expensive. Tony's Fine Foods allows us to sell in grocery stores throughout the West Coast, from Seattle and Portland down to Los Angeles, and into Western Nevada."

Just why have Polska Food products proved so wildly popular? Bridget says it's first and foremost about the ingredients. "Most Americans assume that pierogi are heavy, boring balls of dough, laden with highly processed fats and fillers, MSG, preservatives, additives and everything else that is not only not good for you, but tastes like some warm, plastic substance with salt. Our goal was to create true Polish cuisine, that just happens to be very healthy."

Polska pierogi are free of preservatives, trans fats, added



Bridget Piszczek holds up a basket full of pierogis. Buyers can choose from spinach and feta cheese (with roasted red peppers and portabella mushrooms), mushroom and cabbage (with sauerkraut and caramelized onions), and potato and cheese (with farmer's cheese, herbed potatoes and millet). Whole wheat varieties are also available.

sugars, MSG and GMOs (genetically modified organisms), and are made with organic flour, vegetables and grains. The farmer's cheese used in the classic potato and cheese pierogi is handcrafted, certified kosher, and free of rBST (bovine somatotropin, a peptide produced in the pituitary glands of cattle, which is used to regulate metabolic processes).

At present, buyers can choose from spinach and feta cheese (with roasted red peppers and portabella mushrooms), mushroom and cabbage (with fresh, vinegar-free sauerkraut and caramelized onions), and potato and cheese (with farmer's cheese, herbed potatoes and millet). Whole wheat varieties are also available, yielding a higher-fiber meal.

Preparation of the pierogi is simple: Pop the frozen dumplings in boiling water for 8-10 minutes, or brown in a frying pan with a bit of oil for 3-4 minutes. Top with the traditional sautéed onions, or (for a more decadent dish) dip in sour cream, and serve.

"Surprisingly, our biggest market has actually turned out to be children, most of whom are already eating pasta," Bridget reports. "We have parents coming back again and again, telling us that their kids love the whole wheat pierogi. The parents are amazed that this is such an easy way to get kids to eat some veg-

etables and healthy grains."

With a price point of approximately \$6 for a bag that makes a full pound of pierogi—not to mention the cut taken by each grocer—the Piszczeks will need to sell a lot of dumplings before they can be deemed Silicon Valley success stories. And, purposely lacking any investors or employees—save for a few family members who occasionally help out at Polska Foods' new manufacturing facility in Morgan Hill—the seven-day weeks are likely to continue for the foreseeable future. All of which suits the Saratoga couple just fine.

"We may not be the best businesspeople," says Bridget, "but we didn't get into this because we wanted to be millionaires. We wanted to make healthy food that's easy to fix and really good to eat. And we know that in this economy, people are still struggling, so we wanted to make it something that every family can afford. That may not deliver the kind of profit margins an investor would want to see, but it works for us."

Chapman is confident that the Piszczeks have a winning business model. "They're a terrific husband-and-wife team; she has the marketing down, he has the great recipes, and they both have great personalities. If you have the marketing and the gift of gab, you'll have it all wrapped up," Chapman predicts.