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BITS & BITES

food411
BY DENISE I. O'NEAL

Now that's fast food

CONTEST | Local competitive eater shows he can down more, more, more

BY JERRY SOVERINSKY



Patrick Bertolotti shoves one of 127 jalapeños into his mouth during an eating contest last week. | CHRIS SWEDA—SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

He isn't human. Can't be. Outwardly, of course, he looks the part. His hands, ears, even gelled Mohawk haircut up close, they're all very lifelike.

But when you see what he does, you think: He must be a machine. A Terminator of sorts. With a binge eating kind of superpower.

The 23-year-old Patrick Bertolotti, the second-ranked competitive eater in the world. And during this stormy Sunday afternoon, in Mi Tierra Restaurant in Little Village, he's eating jalapeño peppers. Lots of them; 127, to be exact. In eight minutes.

Bump. At the La Costena "Feel the Heat" Jalapeño Eating Challenge, Bertolotti easily outpaced an elite field of professional gurgitators, his closest challenger — 105-pound Sonya "The Black Widow" Thomas — coming in second with 117 peppers. And despite what to all onlookers was an overwhelmingly impressive masticatory achievement more than worthy of the contest's \$2,500 first place prize, the soft-spoken Bertolotti, whose lofty performance expectations rival those of any world-class athlete, was far from satisfied.

"I was aiming for 200, but the jalapeños were harder than I'd expected," Bertolotti explained somewhat apologetically, just minutes after the final tally was announced. Wiping perspiration from his face as mariachi music blared in the background, he waved to a vocal group of fans who strained to get a peek at the Chicagoan who has carved out an international reputation as one of the world's most gifted speed eaters.

"I started eating competitively about four years ago," Bertolotti said. "My sister Susan told me to enter this local pizza contest, she knew I'd be good at it. Even though I won, I knew I could do better. I began looking into other competitions, and discovered the IFOCE [International Federation of Competitive Eaters]. From there, I started entering their contests, I got a lot better."

The New York-based International Federation of Competitive Eaters — now officially promoted as Major League Eating — oversees and sanctions cash-sponsored eating contests throughout the world. Some have become quite famous (Nathan's Famous Fourth of July International Hot Dog-Eating Contest is perhaps the best known), and several of its top-ranked competitors have made side careers from their prize winnings.

"I've won probably \$150,000 since I started doing this," estimated Bertolotti, "but it's not really about the money for me."

The Kendall College graduate, who works as a cook for a local caterer when he's not traveling to eating contests as far away as Prague, Czech Republic, says that while he has his "competitive streaks," his motivation to compete stems more from finding his niche with a discipline in which he excels.

"I played sports my whole life but was not very good," he said. "But with [competitive eating], when I do my best, it shows. I can definitely leave my mark."

Leaving his mark is perhaps an understatement. In the past few years, Bertolotti has set nearly two dozen world records ("I think 22?") he says, not quite sure at the current total, becoming one of MLE's most popular and accomplished competitors.



Onlookers take in the scene at Mi Tierra Restaurant in Little Village where the 2008 La Costena "Feel the Heat" Jalapeño Eating Challenge took place last week. RIGHT: Patrick Bertolotti signs a photo to be hung on the wall of the restaurant.

"Pat Bertolotti is quite simply one of the best competitive eaters ever," gushed Ryan Nerz, spokesman for Major League Eating. "His jaw strength is phenomenal, his swallow timing exquisite... [He] is extremely appealing to sponsors... because he is young, charismatic, articulate, knowledgeable in the culinary arts and distinctive looking."

Bertolotti says competitive eating contests require different techniques, depending on the food, and jalapeños are no different. Interspersed between rapid-fire chewing of the plump La Costena peppers, Bertolotti chugged nearly 100 ounces of chocolate milk (a stand-alone achievement), a necessary antidote to the jalapeño heat. Throughout the machinelike process, he looked unfazed, focused on the task at hand, an iPod blaring motivating tracks of encouragement.

"It's a mix of Mexican Cheerleader and Dillinger Four," Bertolotti revealed. "I listen to it during every contest... I know how many songs I need to get

through for the contest, and it helps me stay focused."

As the crowd thins and Bertolotti adjusts his belt buckle, he appears slightly winded, if not tired. Understandable for the grueling eight-minute workout he's just endured.

"My body's not gonna be happy with me tonight," he says matter-of-factly, rubbing his stomach lightly for effect. "Jalapeños aren't fun."

It's a perfect afternoon for resting on a couch anyway, I mention, gesturing to the steady rain shower outside.

"Not gonna happen," he says, gathering his gear and preparing to leave. "I've gotta head to work. I had to cut my shift short this morning to make to this contest, I've got another four hours [of work] tonight."

Now that's a work ethic. You'd expect nothing less from a world champion.

Jerry Soverinsky is a local free-lance writer.



Farm in the city

The City of Chicago will hold a grand-opening celebration for its pilot farmstand program at 11 a.m. Oct. 1.

Chicago's Downtown Farmstand, 66 E. Randolph, will feature seasonal sustainable produce and dry goods from farms within 250 miles of the city.

The farmstand will hold lunchtime demonstrations on Wednesdays and Fridays. The farmstand will close mid-December and reopen in spring.

The hours of operation are 11 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday-Friday; 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. Saturday. Details: (312) 744-2400.

Good ribbing

Moonshine and Socca restaurants partner with Jack Daniel's Tennessee Whiskey for a rib cookoff at noon Saturday at Moonshine, 1824 W. Division; \$25 in advance or \$35, at the door.

Area restaurants will compete in the event along with winners from the 2008 Memphis BBQ Contest. Details: (773) 862-8686.

Flavors of fall

A cornucopia of fall's harvest is at the center of a cooking class at Va Pensiero, 1566 Oak, Evanston, at 6:30 p.m. Friday; \$65.

Ingredients will include pears and apples, duck and quail as well as squash and turnips. Details: (847) 475-7779.

Check mate

Chef Daniel Tucker of Room21, 2110 S. Wabash, will hold a cooking class the first Thursday of every month beginning at 6 p.m. Oct. 2; \$10.

The class will be a demo of a butternut squash risotto partnered with Most Chandon un-oaked Chardonnay.

Guests dining in the restaurant after the demo will receive \$10 off their dinner check. Details: (312) 328-1198.

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BY DENISE I. O'NEAL



WOLFGANG PUCK PIZZA

★★★★
Suggested retail: \$5.99 for one 12½-ounce pizza
Per ½ pizza: 330 calories, 17 g fat, 690 mg sodium, 30 g carbohydrates

Wolfgang Puck has put a lot of quality ingredients in his all-natural pizzas, offering a top-notch product at a price that's comparable to other pizzas its size.

But there is where the similarities end. A top celebrity chef, Puck has put his talent to work for those who can't get to his restaurants.

Having eaten at his former Chicago Spago restaurant, I can honestly say Puck's pizzas offer the same quality of ingredients and deliver a dose of good taste that the restaurant offered.

The four-cheese, tomato and pesto pizza is loaded with taste and pizzazz. The four cheeses — mozzarella, Parmesan, fontina and goat cheese — blend superbly and offer a unique taste.

The basil pesto sauce is a nice change from the traditional tomato sauce and ups the pizza's overall quality.

Throw in a honey-infused crust and sliced tomatoes and you have a pizza befitting a celebrity chef.

Never one to rest on his laurels, Puck even offers suggestions to customize the pizza on its packaging, including topping the pizza with ingredients such as sautéed chicken or beef, caramelized onions or thin-sliced prosciutto.

The pizzas are available at Dominic's and Jewel Food stores.



Bertolotti eats a final jalapeño after winning the recent contest.

HIS TALLY, TIME

Patrick Bertolotti holds more than 20 world eating records.

With a strong emphasis on soft-form and sweet foods, he also shines in a Chicago specialty, with an impressive — if not untouchable — pizza-eating accomplishment. Among Pat's records:

- ◆ 16-inch pizza: 22 slices, 10 minutes.
- ◆ Doughnuts: 47 glazed and cream-filled doughnuts, 5 minutes.
- ◆ Grits: 21 pounds, 10 minutes.
- ◆ Ice cream: 1.75 gallons, 8 minutes.
- ◆ Key lime pie: 10.8 pounds, 8 minutes.
- ◆ Kolacky: 44 cherry kolaches, 8 minutes.
- ◆ Oysters: 34 dozen Acme oysters, 8 minutes.
- ◆ Peanut butter and jelly sandwiches: 42, 10 minutes.
- ◆ Waffles: 29 (8-ounce) waffles, 10 minutes.
- ◆ Whole turkey: 6.91 pounds roast turkey meat, 8 minutes.

To learn more about the super eater, or to find out about one of his upcoming competitions, visit Bertolotti's Web site, www.deeplisheds.com. He also is regular on Steve Dahl's show between 5:30 and 6:30 a.m. Fridays on Jack FM (WJMK-FM, 104.3).

Jerry Soverinsky