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Not your average butcher

October 5, 2004



Butcher John Gianfreda cuts up a goat

Photo: *Supplied*

Stephanie Alexander sends a "get well" message to Jonathan Gianfreda.

As many readers will know, butcher extraordinaire Jonathan Gianfreda is gravely ill.

This small piece is offered in the place of a "get well card" so Jonathan and his wife Toni and son Gaston know how much he means to so many of Melbourne's food lovers.

Our minds and our hearts are concentrated on positive messages and hope that he can weather this hurricane.

The stereotypical butcher is round and jolly, with many nudge-nudge asides to his female customers.

But that's just the opposite of Jonathan - always immaculately dressed in up-to-the-minute Italian gear, tanned, fit (after all those bike rides with Gaston), bright-eyed, always a flashing smile, always courteous and bursting with positive energy.

My kitchen always felt a happier place after a visit from Jonathan.

He lives not far from my cafe and sometimes if we made a mistake with an order or ran out of something, Jonathan would do the mercy dash on his way home.

He taught my kitchen staff how to develop the collagen in a terrine mix by massaging the mix on a scrupulously clean, stainless steel bench so each finished slice would have perfect cohesion.

He came over to discuss with me how to devise a cut of pork that approximated to the pork loins I had been enjoying in France, with samples, of course.

He scrutinised the meat sections of my newly revised *Cook's Companion*, and developed a special sausage for Richmond Hill Cafe & Larder that we could offer as an exclusive grill item.

All of this without extra charge.

Jonathan likes nothing better than being with those who truly love their food. When I tried out my very first grilled breast of Cape Barren goose, it was Jonathan, Toni and Gaston whom I rang, asking them to share it with me.

Jonathan introduced a European sensibility to the range in his shop and was one of the first to make and sell a wide range of charcuterie and salumeria, allowing small cafes and pub dining rooms to offer interesting specialities.

Caul fat, sweetbreads, ox cheek, stuffed duck neck, beef tendon - no worries, Jonathan would get it.

Restaurateur Ronnie di Stasio told me he believes Jonathan developed Melbourne's understanding of many Italian specialities, such as prosciutto crudo and cotechino.

Jonathan was also interested in French butchery. Chef Damien Pignolet regularly air-freighted Jonathan's jambon de bayonne to Bistro Moncur in Sydney.

"When Bistro Moncur opened in 1993, I felt Sydney needed a restaurant that reflected the true style of a Parisian bistro," Pignolet says.

"The key was to find products that stood out as outstanding for their quality. Jonathan's bayonne ham was so reminiscent of the original product I had enjoyed in France."

And colleague Tony Tan has this to say about Jonathan's marvellous cotechino: "Packed with lean pork, bits of fat and rind to give that delicious sticky quality, we often eat it with lentils and salad. Leftovers are treated like Chinese lap cheong; they are stir-fried with bok choy, chilli and oyster sauce."

We love Jonathan and all he has given to Melbourne. It is appropriate that he was made a Legend at last year's Melbourne Food & Wine Festival. And so he is.

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