



Mary Feldmannova and Steve Feldmann's Gulu-Gulu Cafe is a bohemian outpost in Lynn. (David Kamerman/Globe staff)

Romancing the stove

Food and romance mix when couples open a restaurant

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By Alison Arnett, Globe Staff | February 14, 2007

LYNN -- Romance is an element of any restaurant, so it's no wonder that there are plenty of couples in the business. Some of the restaurants are in the glittery high end of the business. Others, like Gulu-Gulu Cafe, in this city's gritty Central Square, are lively versions of coffee houses. Many young couples start small, bringing their hopes and love to modest storefronts.

In a new wave of mom-and-pops, these couples offer their dedication and youthful spirit to a new style of ethnic dining. Gulu-Gulu Cafe is a bohemian outpost offering European beers, coffee, and light food to the loft dwellers and others who congregate here. Marie Feldmannova and her husband, Steve Feldmann, named their quirky place for the cafe in Prague where they met. Another, in East Boston's Day Square, is Restaurante El Buen Gusto, whose vibrant colors and homey Latino food show off the passions of Salvadoran-born Ingrid and Francisco Perlera. Dechen and Choesang Martsa, of Martsa on Elm Street in Somerville, have been so successful with their take on Tibetan dishes that they're breaking through a wall to expand.

But even with enthusiasm and hip surroundings, the restaurant business can be frightening. "The day we opened, I was crying in the parking lot," says Gulu-Gulu's Feldmannova, a native of Czechoslovakia and a research nurse at Fenway Community Health Center. "I was afraid people wouldn't like us." But the brick-walled cafe has had steady business since opening two years ago, says Feldmann, 34, a Bay State native, who runs the day-to-day operation.

At Gulu-Gulu one chilly Saturday afternoon recently, Feldmann waits on tables until Thary Lin, one of the waitresses, arrives. Feldmannova, 33, walks over from the couple's loft across the street where she's been napping. They expect to be busy. Czech, Belgian, Canadian, and American artisanal beers are advertised on a board; the long, narrow room is furnished with mismatched tables and chairs the couple found in antique shops, and a DVD screen of a fire is displayed on the back wall.

Feldmann was a Web developer before he earned an MBA and decided he didn't want to go back to a cubicle. His lively design of the restaurant's website, gulu-gulu.com, illustrates the place's verve. But there's no phone book listing for the cafe. Feldmann laughs. "Basically, we were so poor when we opened the place," he says, that they used voice over IP -- Internet phone service -- for the restaurant.

They thought they would draw "25-to-35-year-olds with artistic inclinations," he says. In fact, their clientele ranges from 80-something Guido, a Sicilian who comes every Saturday for dinner, to young Eastern Europeans, to customers "black, white, and every age group." The cafe serves substantial sandwiches, soup, dessert crepes and other pastries, and is a place where book clubs meet. There's an open-mike night on Fridays and live music or sometimes a DJ on Saturdays. "People come in just to look at the art," says Feldmannova.

For Francisco Perlera, 33, who also opened two years ago in an East Boston building he bought, El Buen Gusto is a showcase for his mother's Salvadoran food. His wife, Ingrid, says it was difficult working when she was pregnant with 14-month-old Edgardo, who is asleep in a high chair on a recent sunny afternoon. Francisco also works as a manager for Triangle, a building maintenance company, so Ingrid steps in often. "She's my other hand when I'm not here," he says.

Brilliantly colored photographs of El Salvador cover the walls, as customers come in for Salvadoran enchiladas, hearty soups with grilled chicken, and sides of rice, salad, and homemade tortillas. Francisco is not new to the restaurant business. His mother supported her family at home with a restaurant, and now, though she doesn't cook all the time, she helps out. "If she doesn't cook, she gets sick," he says. A niece, sister-in-law, and other family members work there.

The food is all made to order. "We don't reheat anything," he says. Some Mexican dishes are mixed in with Salvadoran favorites. "Americans have in the back of their heads Mexican," he says. And Latinos, who are most of their customers, like burritos and tacos.

The East Boston neighborhood is saturated with Latin restaurants. One way El Buen Gusto stands out is its sleek, contemporary style. "We wanted to have Latin food, but a different style," says Ingrid, 22, a nursing student at University of Massachusetts-Boston. Francisco adds that on weekends, families congregate, and in the evening when the lights dim, "this is where you want to take your girlfriend." A special Valentine's menu is planned for tonight. Francisco, who has a degree in management from UMass-Boston, has more plans for his establishment: valet parking, and, hopefully, sidewalk dining.

For some couples, owning a restaurant together is a dream that takes a few tries. Dechen and Choesang Martsa opened and then closed their first restaurant, Rising Sun, in Cambridge in the late '90s because "it was too much work." Dechen, who was the cook, had an 8-month-old son then and was pregnant. Time passed, their two children were older, and so they started again in Davis Square. Their tiny spot is packed most nights, says Dechen, 36, whose father, Tsering Dongshi, a chef at Tremont 647, makes the South End restaurant's famous momos, Tibetan dumpling s.

Choesang, 31, does most of the cooking at Martsa's while Dechen is his sous chef and greets the customers. Dechen develops the recipes at home. Many dishes, especially the curries, are similar to Indian cuisine, but "lighter," she says. Tibetans use lots of greens, such as spinach and bok choy.

Davis Square is crowded with establishments. Adding on the adjacent space where they now have a take-out cafe will give the couple 45 more seats, and putting 20 new dishes on the already expansive menu will help them compete.

One Friday afternoon, daughter Norzum, 8, runs in to talk to her father before ducking back into the kitchen. She and her brother, Jigme, 9, hang out in the afternoons before their grandmother comes to take them home. Both Dechen and Choesang are Tibetans who grew up in India. Dechen's family had a restaurant; Choesang's father was a religious leader, a yogi, who now has a temple in India. Choesang himself was a monk from age 9 to 13, Dechen says. Then she giggles. No, he wasn't a monk when she met him later in the United States.

"This restaurant is his idea," she says, and he agreed to do the cooking; she plans to study fashion design after the remodeling is completed.

Over momos and crunchy bhajis -- potatoes and onions in a chickpea batter, like a light version of pakoras -- they describe the expansion. "My uncle is a great painter in South India," Dechen says. "He's doing paintings for me, and we're planning more woodwork." The space will have windows opening to the street, and, with luck, a beer and wine license.

They take more than a little pride in this build-out. After all, this is where they work together all day and all evening. For all three couples, their restaurants and their dreams are part of their romance. Besides the financial investment, there's the emotional one.

Gulu-Gulu's Feldmann says, "People like our place. And it's *our* place."

Gulu-Gulu Cafe, 56 Central Square, Lynn, 617-848-5967, gulu-gulu.com. Restaurante El Buen Gusto, 295 Bennington St., East Boston, 617-561-6333. Martsa on Elm, 233A Elm St., Davis Square, Somerville, 617-666-0660. ■