

Playing with flames

Monday, July 28, 2003

GILROY - I'm not exactly an inexperienced chef.

I'm married to a fine chef but do most of the cooking at home. I watch the Food Network with some regularity. I even have a garlic and dill grilled potatoes recipe that could be a cook-off contender.

But I've never handled a 5-foot plume of fire shooting off a 36-inch frying pan - intentionally or otherwise. On Sunday, I did.

I got to Gourmet Alley and met up with veteran pyro chef Steve Janisch, who was in the midst of grilling up perhaps his 144,000th serving of calamari Gilroy style.

Janisch has worked 50 hours every Garlic Festival the past 24 years, and it takes him just more than two minutes to grill up a batch of calamari. Do the math.

"Step right in!" Janisch said to me, I think. Between the rock 'n' roll blaring over the loudspeakers, the applause of the crowd, the roar of the flames and the intermittent shouts of "Fire in the hole!," it was kind of tough to hear everything Janisch said.

"I'm gonna get this pan piping hot, and when I tell you, throw in this bucket of squid and yell 'Fire in the hole!' " he instructed.

We put what must have been a 40-pound pan over the flames and tossed in olive oil from one of those bulk containers. Everything I was doing I had done before in my home, but never to this scale. It felt like someone had put me in the land of giants.

As Janisch pushed and pulled the pan around the grill I looked straight at him waiting for the go-ahead to dump squid, knowing that once I did there would be a flame of unknown magnitude I'd have to contend with.

Of course, it was at that moment, I noticed how red Janisch's face had become. This was not from the sun, a 1.4 million-kilometer-wide nuclear explosion. Rather, Janisch's bright pink hue was from this year's portion of those 144,000 batches of calamari.

Suddenly, I realized the future of my skin tone was in my hands, literally, along with a bucket of squid.

"It goes away after a little while," Janisch told me later about the red-pink

tone.

So there it went. I threw the squid, gently, into the pan and watched Janisch slide the pan back and forth to get plenty of oil and squid juice onto the flames below. Janisch's flame hit the wood ceiling above, before falling back down into the pan.

A moment later, after Janisch let me take over the pan and stir in the half a dozen ingredients, I felt to the left of me the most intense heat ever created by mankind. Another pyro chef - less than a foot away - had managed to outdo Janisch, at least for the moment. I uttered something that can't be repeated here and went back to work on my own batch.

Janisch let me do another couple of batches on my own and hounded me to "Keep stirring!" no matter how hard or fast I seemed to move the stuff around. "Stir, stir, stir!"

After my batches were done and I had stepped aside to take some further notes, Garlic Godfather Val Filice graciously welcomed me to my first Garlic Festival and talked to me about the alley's perfect safety record despite the enormous flames.

"Safety first is my motto," Filice said as he crossed his fingers and chuckled at me, probably knowing that with a first-time pyro chef on board, he could see that perfect record getting blemished.

As much fun as it was, I felt a little inferior. On the far left end, yet another outrageous flame flared into the wood beams overhead.

My flames were weak; so weak that our chief photographer, James Mohs, decided to step in and do his own batch. He wanted to show the rookie - that'd be me - how to do it.

I'll give Mohs credit. His flame was bigger than mine. It didn't go real high, it just went wide ... kind of like Mohs.

Watching Mohs work the flames amid the pyro chef brotherhood reminded me of my first days in Gilroy. I started working for The Dispatch on Sept. 23, 2002. It was the first day of the 3,147-acre Croy Fire.

Like those three days in September when the blaze burned through the Santa Cruz Mountains toward Gilroy and Morgan Hill, Mohs was there, too. He was photographing another brotherhood of pyros - the firefighters who put out the mammoth blaze.

I interviewed a lot of those men and women on the front lines of the fire. I interviewed even more at their base camp - Christmas Hill Park, the site of the Gilroy Garlic Festival, the place where, essentially, my career in Gilroy started.

Standing in Gourmet Alley, the heart of Christmas Hill, it hit me that no matter how small a flame I may have lit thus far, I've walked through the proverbial Gilroy fire. I've experienced the worst (the Croy fire) and best (the Garlic Festival) of Gilroy life.

And what a blast it has been.