

**RECIPE FOR LIVING** / Pauline Uchmanowicz

## What's cooking at the Bistro?

America has always been a land of re-invention. So this past New Year's Eve, owners Mary Anne and Richard Erickson shut the doors of their popular Ulster County eatery Blue Mountain Bistro and hunkered down, deciding what to do next. "If you're self-employed what are you gonna do? Turn in your recipes?" says Richard, the chef, whose Mediterranean-influenced cookery has won regional awards and earned high marks from Zagat. "I've been doing this — running restaurants — for twenty-five years and cooking in them for more, the last twelve in Woodstock. We loved the building; we loved the kitchen. We wanted to do something different from what we were doing but similar."

Four months later the couple reopened for business as Blue Mountain Bistro Catering Company. The rustic décor and attention to fine cooking commending its former incarnation remain — only the concept has changed. In addition to hosting private parties and receptions the establishment is planning diverse culinary events, including Mystery Dinner Theater, cooking demonstrations and cookbook signings. The reformulated company also plans to introduce "Affordable Luxuries," a reasonably priced catering option that allows customers to pick up food at Blue Mountain without hiring a



*Richard, Mary Anne and Chris Erickson.*

staff or dealing with the hoopla of a traditionally catered affair.

"It's not easy to change. Talking about it is one thing but doing it is difficult," says Chef Erickson. "It wasn't because we had to; our past two years [as a restaurant] were our best ever. People thought we were crazy. But the best time to change is when your back is not against the wall; that's when your best creative ideas come. In the past, our life had to conform to our business. But now I believe: make the business conform to your life."

To initiate their lifestyle transformation the Ericksons first set about remodeling the premises, an historical building on the corner of Route 212 and Glasco Turnpike. On the ground floor (comfortably seating one hundred), they knocked down walls, sanded wide-plank hardwood floors and reinforced beams and columns, transforming once small

dining areas into an expansive L-shaped space that commences from the bar entrance, graced by a grand piano. To the rear of the bar, an intimate room with terracotta flooring remains, now wrapped completely in banquettes upholstered in Persian-inflected fabric. Other redecorating accents followed. An upper-story function room already in place still awaits its destiny.

gregation, whom the Blue Mountain proprietors count as neighbors. More recently, over a hundred supporters gathered for a Sunday champagne brunch to hear Maurice Hinchey speak about his re-election goals for 2006.

"We want to create a way to bring people into the space," says Richard. "I want to bring in other people who are interested in doing something unusual, out of the ordinary for them. I'm not in competition with any restaurants now, so I can bring in area talent." Done. Beginning on June 16, a rotating roster of local professional chefs will lead Thursday Night Cooking Classes, from 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. — \$75 per person includes cooking demonstrations, dinner, wine pairings and instructional packets. "In offering classes, we're actually answering requests people have made over the years," says Erickson. A former instructor at Manhattan's French Culinary Institute, he alternates nights with other teachers, demonstrating how to prepare French bistro favorites, such as "perfect" roast chicken, silky mashed potatoes and glazed vegetables.

Simple but elegant dinner party planning will be provided by food stylist Maureen Luchejko, owner of Saugerties gourmet shop Taste of Home. Associate food editor at *Gourmet Magazine*, Woodstocker Alexis Touchet will share recipes from her Cajun upbringing, including shrimp, crab and oyster gumbo and pecan pie. Spice mistress Kiran Ramgotra Sancious will teach Indian home cooking, using techniques and recipes learned from her mother and other relatives. Having recently taken part in one of Ramgotra Sancious's hands-on sessions myself — part cooking demonstration and part-performance — I recommend her entertaining teaching method.

Among other innovative activities scheduled at the catering company will be Breakthrough Café, led by ideas champion Mitch Ditkoff on June 24 at 6:30 p.m. (\$45, includes dinner). Known for conducting workshops to help people break out of the "corporate mold," Ditkoff believes that our most inspired thoughts occur not in sterile hotel function

rooms but while relaxing with friends over food and drinks in café settings. During the event, members of Ditkoff's trained staff will pose as waiters, passing out idea cards or provocative questions along with cocktails and hors d'oeuvres.

Later in the season, on Friday, August 5, Blue Mountain Bistro will host The Slow Mediterranean Kitchen (\$85), a wine dinner tribute to renowned cookbook author Paula Wolfert. Her daughter Leila Wolfert, a wine expert, will select the beverage pairings. "I've been in love with Paula's cookbooks for thirty years," says Erickson. A pioneer of Old Chef Ways and Slow Food techniques in the United States, he will prepare recipes for the occasion from her latest release, *Slow Mediterranean Cooking*.

"We've generated all kinds of activities and we'll see what works. Then we'll handout comment cards," says Chef Erickson. "We want people to have fun here." To register for an upcoming event (seating is limited and reservations required for most) or for more information about Blue Mountain Bistro Catering Company you may call 679-8519, or visit their website at [www.bluemountainbistro.com](http://www.bluemountainbistro.com).++