

## Mom-and-son cafe offers hearty home cooking

MARY CHAO • STAFF WRITER • MAY 18, 2008

On a clear, chilly spring morning, Maureen Brainard busily prepares the staff of WhatchaGotCookin for another day. Her son Joe Challenger chops and dices in the kitchen, and the wait staff gets ready for customers at the canalside eatery.

After a career in banking, Brainard, 56, of Rochester opened WhatchaGotCookin with Challenger two years ago when she was laid off. Challenger, 30, of Fairport, newly minted from the Culinary Institute of America, was looking to open a restaurant while Brainard was seeking a career change.

"The timing was just right," Brainard says.

The mother-and-son team searched for months for the right spot and heard that the owners of the Lift Bridge Cafe in Fairport were looking to retire.

"Once we saw the place, we fell in love with the site," Brainard says.

In May 2006, Brainard and Challenger opened WhatchaGotCookin, emphasizing home-style food at affordable prices. Specialties include bacon-wrapped meatloaf, chicken and biscuits and barbecue. Most dinner entrees are in the range of \$8 to \$15.

It's mom's home cooking, "cooked by a CIA chef," Brainard says.

The other major changes since they took over the Lift Bridge Cafe were remodeling the restaurant's interior and keeping it open year-round. Lift Bridge Cafe was only open nine months of the year and served mostly on its outdoor patio.

The remodeling included a floral landscape mural set alongside brick walls. Yellow colanders have been made into whimsical hanging lampshades.

Janice and Fritz Dell of Patchogue on Long Island enjoyed white bean chili under a yellow colander lampshade. They were in town to visit their son and stumbled upon the restaurant beside the canal.

"It's a nice atmosphere," Janice Dell says.

On the outside patio, Chris Forken, 61, of Fairport basked in the sun while waiting for her lunch date. She dines at the restaurant two to three times a week and raves about the salads.

Forken says she often visits the restaurant with her business clients or with her grandchildren, because the staff is "wonderful with kids."

MCHAO@DemocratandChronicle.com



KRIS J. MURANTE staff photographer

Jennifer Sauter of Penfield, left, and Chris Forken of Fairport chat during a business lunch on the deck at WhatchaGotCookin, beside the Erie Canal in Fairport.



Brainard