

90-Year-Old EMPANADA MAN Brings Argentine Flavor to The Palace

A resident of The Palace at Coral Gables gives empanadas away to neighbors and staff members at the luxury retirement community

BY ANA VECIANA-SUAREZ
aveciana-suarez@miamiherald.com

Mario Smuglovsky has been making empanadas — delicious meat-stuffed patties that melt in your mouth — for more years than most people have been alive. Experience and expertise have not subtracted from his enjoyment.

“I get great satisfaction from making them,” Smuglovsky says. “I like the results. I like seeing people’s reaction when they take their first bite.”

Smuglovsky is 90 years old, a veteran of the wars (and truces) of the culinary world. Since his move earlier this year to The Palace at Coral Gables, a luxury senior living community, he has been handing out empanadas to staff and residents with the kind of gusto reserved for the zealous. He makes the treats regularly, by the dozens, on request or, quite simply, for no reason at all.

People call him Empanada Man. Or Mr. Empanada. He certainly has earned the honors.

“They’re out of this world,” gushes Pam Parker, social director at The Palace. “I bring them home, and now my husband is addicted to them.”

But it’s not just the taste that gets rave reviews. His fans say Smuglovsky’s joy in making the empanadas adds a magical ingredient. “He’s got the most wonderful personality,” Parker adds. “You can tell he really enjoys making them. He shows his love through his cooking.”

There’s a bittersweet story behind the empanadas, though, a story of failure and triumph, of persistence and commitment. Few have heard it.

Smuglovsky arrived in Miami from his native Buenos Aires in 1960, with a wife and daughter in tow and the hopeful intentions of embarking



Mario Smuglovsky, aka the Empanada Man, is a whiz at making the meat turnovers. Although he’s 90, he hands them out to neighbors and newcomers at his retirement community.

on a new life. His mother owned three hotels in Mar del Plata, but the family, a younger brother included, had found it impossible to live under the Peron dictatorship. Miami, on the other hand, beckoned with possibilities.

In June of that year, long before the huge influx of Hispanics, the Smuglovskys opened what was probably Miami’s first Argentine empanada factory, in a building at Flagler Street and 18th Avenue. El Gaucho was something of a novelty in a tourist town of snowbirds, but Smuglovsky, ever optimistic, was convinced his Argentine patties would be a big hit.

So he hit the pavement to market the 4,000 empanadas the factory was producing every day.

It was an uphill struggle.

“Nobody around here knew what an empanada was,” Smuglovsky recalls with a resigned sigh. “There weren’t that many people who even wanted to try.”

In fact, there were so few people interested in the patties that El Gaucho was selling only 100 of the 15-cent empanadas a day. Within six months, the Smuglovskys were forced to close El Gaucho. They lost “every single penny,” everything they had invested in the business.

“I was devastated, absolutely devastated,” he says. “It was very hard to take.”

Smuglovsky swore that he would never ever sell another empanada again and, depressed and demoralized, did not work for three years. His first wife returned to Argentina while he muddled along in his adopted country.

That could’ve been the end of the Smuglovsky empanada, and, in fact, it was for a long time, because Smuglovsky did not bake a single empanada for years. He was busy cobbling a life together. In 1962, Smuglovsky met Yolanda Diaz, a recently arrived Cuban refugee, on a blind date. He barbecued Argentine style for her, and it was, she jokes, love at first bite. They married and purchased Topp’s Sandwich Shop on East Flagler Street, a few blocks from the

courthouse, and added Latin dishes to the already extensive menu. For 10 years, they — and 17 other employees — served everything from chicken with yellow rice (\$1.50) to corned beef and cabbage (\$2.25) to sliced beef tongue sandwich (\$1.10).

Judges and lawyers frequented the eatery and local celebrities — including Maurice Ferre, who would later become Miami mayor — were regulars, but the labor was backbreaking and the hours unbearable, from 8 a.m. to 3 a.m.

“I worked the days and he worked the evenings,” Yolanda says, “but sometimes we had to do both. It was exhausting.”

The Smuglovskys eventually closed the shop when the building was condemned and Yolanda developed health problems. With two young children to support at home, Smuglovsky opened Kendall Seafood, then worked as a processing plant manager in Homer, Alaska, before returning to Miami as a quality control and international buyer for several seafood importers.

And the empanadas? He rarely made them and usually only for very special occasions. “I gave them away, never charged.”

Earlier this year the incredibly agile Smuglovsky retired — “I just don’t have the energy I used to have” — and only then did he turn his full attention back to the empanadas. He tinkered with his mother’s old recipe and then searched for the proper dough, a lighthojaldre (puff pastry) imported from Argentina.

In his kitchen, at a lightly floured counter, he lines up rows of the puff pastry, stuffs the shells with meat and then folds over the crust, braiding it closed with enviable nimbleness.

“I’ve tried to do it the way he does,” Yolanda admits, “but I can’t.”

Maybe nobody can.

Smuglovsky, however, says it’s not the braiding or the crust that makes a perfect empanada. It’s the stuff inside that truly distinguishes the great from the common.

“All the ingredients have to be in balance,” he

says. “One cannot overpower another.”

More importantly, the meat has to be tenderized slowly and with great care, a task he does by boiling the chicken or meat (which he grounds himself) for at least 15 minutes. “You can’t hurry something like this,” he adds. “It’s a lot of work and technique, but I take my time. I want to do it the right way.”

Smuglovsky figures he has given away hundreds of his empanadas, and not only to Palace staff and residents. He has made them for a granddaughter’s social event, and when son Mario Jr. recently hosted a party, he asked his father for 100.

But true to his word, Smuglovsky has not earned a penny from an empanada since that fateful day in 1960 when he tearfully closed down his empanada factory on Flagler.

“This is like a hobby now,” he explains. “I do it because I want to not because I have to.”

MARIO’S ARGENTINE EMPANADAS RECIPE



Mario Smuglovsky, 90, aka the Empanada Man, shows one of his empanadas that’s ready for the oven.

2 lbs. ground chicken breast

1 1/4 lbs. onions, chopped

6 hard boiled eggs, chopped

4 oz. shredded mozzarella cheese

Round pastry dough (empanada-size pastry shells available at Graziano’s or other Argentine markets)

Handful of raisins

Olives

1 TB chopped garlic

1 TSP Complete Seasoning Mix

1 TSP Old Bay Seasoning

1 TSP dried basil

1/4 teaspoon cumin powder

1 TB olive oil

3 TBS white cooking wine

Salt and pepper to taste

In a saute pan, place olive oil and chopped garlic, stirring until golden. Cook ground chicken on medium heat, stirring constantly. Add dry ingredients (reserving the raisins, eggs, and cheese) and cook for 15 minutes. Meanwhile, saute the onions with olive oil until caramelized and add cooking wine. Add caramelized onions to chicken and stir mixture together; continue cooking over medium heat and add salt and pepper to taste. Add 2 cups boiling water

to ground chicken to tenderize and cook for an additional 15-20 minutes or until water evaporates. Remove excess liquid and add the remaining ingredients (raisins, chopped eggs, and cheese). Stir well and allow mixture to cool. Stuff empanada shells with mixture, adding one medium-sized pitted olive per empanada. Fold over crust and close using fork to pinch together or crimping method. Empanadas can be baked immediately or frozen for future use. If frozen, do not

defrost prior to baking; brush with egg mixture and bake as follows. To bake, beat one egg and brush over top and bottom of empanada and place on parchment paper-lined cookie sheet in center oven at 350 degrees for 30 minutes or until crust is golden-brown. Beef empanadas can be made using ground beef for this recipe.

Yield: 24-36 empanadas, depending on size of pastry shell