

Italian foodie

Karen Jesso left a potential psychology career and started her own restaurant.

By Ruth E. Kott, AM'07
 Photography by Dan Dry

In the mid-'70s Karen Jesso, AM'83, MBA'89, lasted two days as a French-fry girl at McDonald's. "It took me longer to read the training manual," she says with a strong Chicago accent. "It was about 50 pages, and it talked about every little ketchup packet." With the French fries, "it's not just that you plop the cage down into the grease and the fries are done. There's a timer, and you have to wait for that thing to come up."

The quest for fry perfection haunted Jesso. "When they put me behind the machine, people were lined up around that building. Their whole order was complete except they're waiting for the fries, and I almost had a nervous breakdown."


Now the co-owner of Indiana-based Italian restaurant Cafe Borgia, Jesso learned something from that brief McDonalds stint. "It made me think of a restaurant as not just this big, anything-goes-anywhere-you-put-it building, but everything in its place and everything accounted for."


Cafe Borgia is far from a detached fast-food dining experience. Open since 1986, the restaurant serves dishes based on customer feedback—favorites include the chicken vesuvio and the tiramisu—and uses vegetables and herbs grown in plots out back. Jesso and her husband, Mike, co-owner and head chef, have become close with their customers and employees. Some of the staff, she says, "have been with me so long" that they feel like family; when the restaurant moved from Lansing, Illinois, to its current Munster location in August 2007, all the employees followed. "They'll wind up being owners of the restaurant," she says, "because we don't have kids."



The Cafe Borgia staff, says Karen Jesso, will eventually "wind up being owners of the restaurant."

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They made the 2007 move because they were simply running out of space. Customers wanted to host parties at Borgia, which has garnered favorable reviews in *Gourmet* and *Chicago* magazines, but there wasn't enough room. The Munster location has two party rooms and a bigger kitchen. The interior is full of paintings, posters, and prints—the link tying the look together is less about a particular aesthetic and more about relationships with customers and friends. Food and wine murals painted by artist Zoia Chapovalova, whom Jesso met when they both lived in Hyde Park, cover the main walls. Drawings by Jeff Hennecke, a loyal customer, hang in one party room and decorate the menu covers. Inspired by Picasso, Hennecke made each complex drawing in 20 minutes. Other customers have given artwork to the restaurant, like the two signed Salvador Dali originals donated by a manager at Fitness Pointe, a gym that shares Borgia's parking lot.

While giving a restaurant tour, Jesso's love for her job is apparent. But owning a restaurant wasn't her original career goal when she moved to Hyde Park in 1980. Working on her master's degree in psychology, she hoped to eventually get a PhD. She spent three years as a psychiatric technician at Chicago's Mercy Hospital in the homicide-suicide ward. "I realized that the same patients kept coming back. Once they got their meds and got their treatment, they'd go back into the environment they came from." Frustrated by the cycle, while receiving her diploma in Rockefeller Chapel, she decided to go back to school for her MBA.

While at Chicago Booth, then the Graduate School of Business, Jesso owned the school's concession stand in Stuart Hall. "I saw a sign in the basement that said, 'Bids due Friday,'" she says, "and whoever had the highest bid owned the concession." She bid \$225,000 and found financing, and Mike, with whom she had worked at House of Pizza in Hammond, Indiana, in the late 1970s, helped her set up shop, redesigning the menu and creating recipes. Although the stand had lost money in previous years, Jesso made a profit of more than \$100,000. "If I had kept that," says Jesso, "I would have been a multimillionaire."

Women made up only 5 percent of her MBA class, and discrimination was common; she remembers taking a behavioral-sciences class where she was the lone woman on a five-student project. The men wanted her to be the typist, and when she made a suggestion, she recalls, "one guy said, 'Keep your ideas to yourself. Don't play hardball with the big boys.'"

Even today it's a challenge to be a female business owner, says Jesso. Her U of C degrees help, but in meetings with men, she finds that she needs to play to male egos. Not so with her husband, Mike; working together has made their relationship stronger. They make a good team, she says. She is the weekend hostess and does the books, and the menu is Mike's baby—his signature dish is eggplant stuffed with prosciutto, mozzarella, and tomato cream. And, she says, "he always likes to get my opinion."

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Chef Mike Jesso mans Cafe Borgia's kitchen.

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