

Mariolino's Restaurant Features New Chef

Jim Cress brings a lifetime of experience and adds weekend specials to local menu.

This past spring Mario Leonetti, the long time owner of Mariolino's Restaurant, suffered a heart attack and was told by his doctors that he needs to slow things down a bit, especially at work.

Of course, anyone who knows Mario knows how that would go. Leonetti continues to open the restaurant every morning (except Mondays) and cook breakfast for his loyal customers... and in addition decided to run for Mayor of Vernonia this fall, which he won.

Leonetti did contact his partner Letha's brother Jim Cress, a long time chef, and asked him to come to Vernonia to help out in the restaurant.

Cress originally started helping out on the weekends, but has now joined the staff at Mariolino's full time and is turning out some weekend specials that have been the talk of the town and have customers coming back again and again, and bringing along their friends.

Cress is originally from southern California where his first job was cooking in restaurants when he was in his teens. "It's the only job I've ever had," he says.

Cress says he saw a pastry chef at a place he worked and thought he might like to try it. "I had moved to

another restaurant and they had decided to start doing pastries in-house, and rather than hire someone expensive, they hired a consultant to teach someone on their staff, and I said 'I would really like to be that guy and learn that,'" explains Cress.



Cress learned the fine art of being a pastry chef at that fine dining restaurant and worked with several chefs during some part-time jobs over several years before landing a dream job at the Four Seasons Hotel in Beverly Hills in the late 80s.

Cress worked in several fine dining establishments over the years as pastry chef and head chef, before joining a wholesale food company where he worked producing pastries.

He moved to Oregon when he joined Compass Group, a food service company where he worked for 10

years, and also worked part-time at Portland's famous Elephant Deli where he continued to dabble in pastries. Most recently he worked for WaferTech, a computer manufacturing company in Camas, Washington, where he was the chef in their employee café. "I took the big leap and left my comfortable corporate job at the computer company to come to Vernonia and help Mario," says Cress. "Mario was looking to take it to another level and my being here in the afternoons and evenings has helped him relax some."

Cress's specials and his presentations have drawn rave reviews from customers. "The increase in business has been obvious," said Cress. He mentioned one loyal customer, Jack, that regularly brings a group of six or eight friends for weekend dinners.

Cress says he is working to change the atmosphere and make dining at Mariolino's a bit more like a fine dining experience, with full table service. He says he features mostly meat specials like prime rib, rib eye steak, fried chicken, or pork chops, because that was something that was missing as an option for Vernonia restaurant goers. Cress says he tries to keep the meals affordable, and will serve a 14 oz. rib eye steak, baked potato, salad or a vegetable, and garlic bread for around \$23.

Cress hopes to add more of

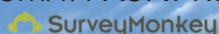


those types of meals to the regular menu. He says he has enjoyed figuring out the challenges that come from cooking in a small town restaurant. He says he really likes working with, and creating fresh foods. "I don't use mixes for my gravy, I make my own stock and it's the real deal, so that's the kinds of sauces you get here, because that's how I know how to do it. That's how I was taught and that's how good food is put out - not skipping a step," says Cress.

Cress says his attention to detail shows when he sees people come back and order the same item again and again. "We pay attention to the quality," says Cress. "I like using fresh vegetables. Our meats for our sandwiches are not processed deli meats - we roast a turkey and slice it. The beef for our french dip is slow cooked and the au jus sauce is made from real beef stock that I make. There is a lot of love that goes into these meals from A to Z and that has led to our success. Some people really recognize the quality."

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