

by Ron James

THE CHEF

At Harrison and Greenwich streets in Tribeca, a few brave souls hurried down streets heavy with the glow of klieg lights and the smell of burning electrical wires. At checkpoints, military police demanded identification from those who wanted to enter this no man's land a few blocks from where the World Trade Center had stood days before.

JIMMY BRADLEY - Chef Jimmy Bradley is co-owner of The Red Cat, an American restaurant in Manhattan's Chelsea district. CNS Photo. With disaster in the air, chef Jimmy Bradley and his business partner, Danny Abrams, had a problem of their own.

"We were planning on opening our second neighborhood restaurant on Sept. 17 just eight blocks from ground zero," explains the 39-year-old Bradley. "The streets were closed; everyone was evacuated or locked in their homes watching events unfolding on television. There was no way we could open. Maybe the space should be something else, but not a neighborhood restaurant."

Bradley and Abrams, co-owners of The Red Cat, an American restaurant in the Chelsea district, were about to pull the plug on their new restaurant, The Harrison. But fate - and Rudy Giuliani - stepped in.

"The mayor held a press conference and basically told New Yorkers to get out of their homes, and go out and spend some money," Bradley says. "We said to ourselves - either we can just give up or we can at least give it a try. And if we fail, so be it."

But they didn't. The Harrison opened Oct. 26, 2001, just 5 1/2 weeks after the terrorist attacks.

"They came out in droves," Bradley says with a note of pride. "It was a ray of hope for them - that out of the ruins life would go on."

Bradley had fallen in love with New York at 29, after working in practically every kind of restaurant all over the country. In 1994, he borrowed \$7,000 each from a few friends to open The Red Cat. An instant success, locals and tourists alike loved the unpretentious setting and his "new American cuisine."

Accolades followed with rave reviews from food writers and praise from his peers. Jonathan Waxman, chef-owner of Barbuto in New York, calls Bradley, "... the chef other cooks aspire to be: cool, calm, poised, intelligent, and confident."

THE DISH

"I love the baked fontina dish," Bradley exclaimed. "It's easy and just a great dish for entertaining. In fact, my writing partner, Andrew Friedman, and his wife, Caitlin, have just that for dinner at least once a week at The Red Cat's bar."

BAKED FONTINA - Jimmy Bradley says to make his Baked Fontina, you cube fontina cheese, top it with slivered garlic, thyme leaves and olive oil, and broil until it's melted and bubbly. Then it can be scooped up with hunks of bread for a great appetizer. CNS Photo. "This is a streamlined, simplified version of fondue without the fondue pot," writes Bradley in his new cookbook "The Red Cat Cookbook: 125 recipes From New York City's Favorite Neighborhood Restaurant" (Clarkson Potter, \$35). "And you make it without the wine, cornstarch or other supporting ingredients. You just take some cubed fontina cheese, top it with slivered garlic, thyme leaves and olive oil, and broil until it's melted and bubbly enough to scoop up with hunks of bread.

"It's a great appetizer and paired with green salad and a glass of wine, a pretty nifty lunch or dinner as well," Bradley continues. "Be sure to use an Italian fontina; the Danish varieties don't melt right for this recipe."

THE WINE

This is an equal opportunity dish when it comes to wine. Take your pick - red, white, sweet or dry, still or bubbly - they all will work. An excellent choice is the Sauvignon Republic Sauvignon Blanc Russian River Valley 2005 (\$18). The fruit flavors and acidity are a wonderful contrast to the rich, buttery flavors of the cheese dish.

The folks at Sauvignon Republic scour the planet for the very best sauvignon blanc vineyards. Each version, whether it is from South America, New Zealand or Sonoma, shows the characteristics of its particular vineyard. The Russian River version shows intense passion fruit and pear flavors balanced with lively, crisp acidity. It received 89 points from Wine Spectator.

BAKED FONTINA WITH GARLIC, OLIVE OIL AND THYME

1 1/2 pounds Italian fontina, soft, brown rind trimmed and discarded, cut into 1-inch cubes

1/4 cup olive oil

6 cloves garlic, thinly sliced

1 tablespoon thyme

1 teaspoon chopped rosemary

Salt, to taste

Freshly ground pepper, to taste

Sliced country bread or rolls

Yields 4 servings.

Preheat broiler.

For individual servings, divide fontina among 4 (6-inch) cast-iron pans. Drizzle with olive oil and scatter garlic, thyme and rosemary over cheese. Season to taste with salt and pepper. Or, use a 12-inch cast-iron skillet and follow the same directions.

Broil until cheese is melted and bubbly, 6 to 7 minutes.

Serve each person an individual pan, setting it on a trivet or napkin; or serve the 12-inch pan from the center of the table. Pass bread alongside for dunking.

- From "The Red Cat Cookbook: 125 recipes From New York City's Favorite Neighborhood Restaurant" (Clarkson Potter, \$35).

Food and Wine: Wine and baked fontina put a new twist on an old tradition by Ron James