

# Spinning gold from garlic cloves

*Local talents spur national entrepreneurial efforts*

◆ **By Jay Ford Cullis**

*jay@ojaivalleynews.com*

Unless you lack a sense of smell, chances are you've caught a whiff of garlic on the breeze while walking around the Arcade on Monday afternoons.

That's because Monday is the day that Shangri-La Gourmet at 219 E. Matilija St. closes its doors to diners and takes the lids off the pots to cook up batches of the restaurant's signature condiment — Garlic Gold. A tasty topping for virtually any meal, the toasted bits of garlic suspended in a golden extra-virgin olive oil is the creation of Shangri-La owner Rinaldo Brutoco and a quartet of intrepid young entrepreneurs.

"I've always been a cook, and when people would come over I'd make Garlic Gold," said Brutoco, who'd been making the golden delicacy for over 15 years in small batches in his kitchen before selling it on the national market in



Photo by Jay Ford Cullis

RINALDO BRUTOCO carves a turkey at his restaurant, Shangri-La Gourmet Deli, home of the popular condiment, Garlic Gold.

## Garlic:

*(Continued from Page A-1)*

February of 2003. "I'd call people to come to dinner and they'd ask — 'Are you going to do that garlic thing?'" he said.

It was while teaching an eighth grade economics class at Oak Grove School that Brutoco met four young students who showed promise in entrepreneurial endeavors. "Over time they wanted a project they could work on so they could see how a business gets started," Brutoco said. Brutoco's son, Orion, suggested going with the garlic, and the wheels began to turn. "I didn't think at the time that the kids would stick with it long enough to start a business," he said. "I thought — this is a great way to teach them high school chemistry," he laughed about working with Bunsen burners and digital scales to perfect the recipe

in his kitchen-lab. But having only ever made it on his household range, Brutoco was wary of the possibility of making Garlic Gold in huge quantities. It was only after sitting down for creative sessions with his young partners — first coming up with a name and then doing cost-profit analyses — that it became clear that they might have a viable business opportunity on their hands. And when Brutoco partnered with Albert's Organic's president, Ojai local Barclay Hope, Garlic Gold took flight. "Barclay ordered hundreds of cases for the (Natural Foods Expo West) show in Anaheim," to be delivered within a month, Brutoco said. The rest was Garlic Gold history. "It's just gone through the roof," he said.

But it was a long road to this point. In order to produce the huge quantities necessary to market Garlic Gold on a national level, Brutoco needed a kitchen to accommodate his endeavor. He set

up shop in Daniel's Bodacious Bistro, the restaurant formerly occupying the space Shangri La now calls home. Six months into selling Garlic Gold nationally, Daniel's closed shop and Brutoco renovated the space for Shangri La. His first thought was to create a restaurant showcase for Garlic Gold, but the idea evolved into a quest to create Ojai's newest local favorite. "There was no place for the normal folks to come get a really good salad or sandwich with really good ingredients. My rule is that if I won't eat it, I don't want to serve it," Brutoco said.

Part of that strict standard means Shangri La's kitchen — the only such kitchen in Ventura County. "That's a really strict standard. It's very expensive and that's why most people don't do it," Brutoco said.

The process by which a kitchen is certified organic takes several months. And not only must all the food served be organic, but even the cleaning supplies must be organically derived. It's an expense worth the trouble for Brutoco, who spares few expenses to bring delicious dishes to his customers at reasonable prices,

with the organic guarantee of no additives or chemicals.

One particular item — Brutoco's signature buffalo burger — has garnered an abundance of local praise. "You have to buy in huge quantities, so you have to have a lot of buffalo dishes," he said. Currently, Shangri La offers buffalo burgers, steaks, stew, and buffalo loaf — a free range cousin to mom's old-fashioned meatloaf, made with lean buffalo meat that has less fat than skinless chicken.

Catering to vegetarians and omnivores alike, Shangri La features a lunch menu packed with sandwiches, salads, and soups.

Two months ago Brutoco unveiled a new dinner menu — complete with an intimate dining atmosphere that transforms Shangri La into a candlelit European café. And with a take-out menu in the works that will give discounts to those taking away food, Shangri La looks to have a firmly established spot in Ojai's gourmet scene. "Our business has been completely built on repeat business," said Brutoco. "Great food, Ojai-friendly atmosphere. We're a place for locals."