

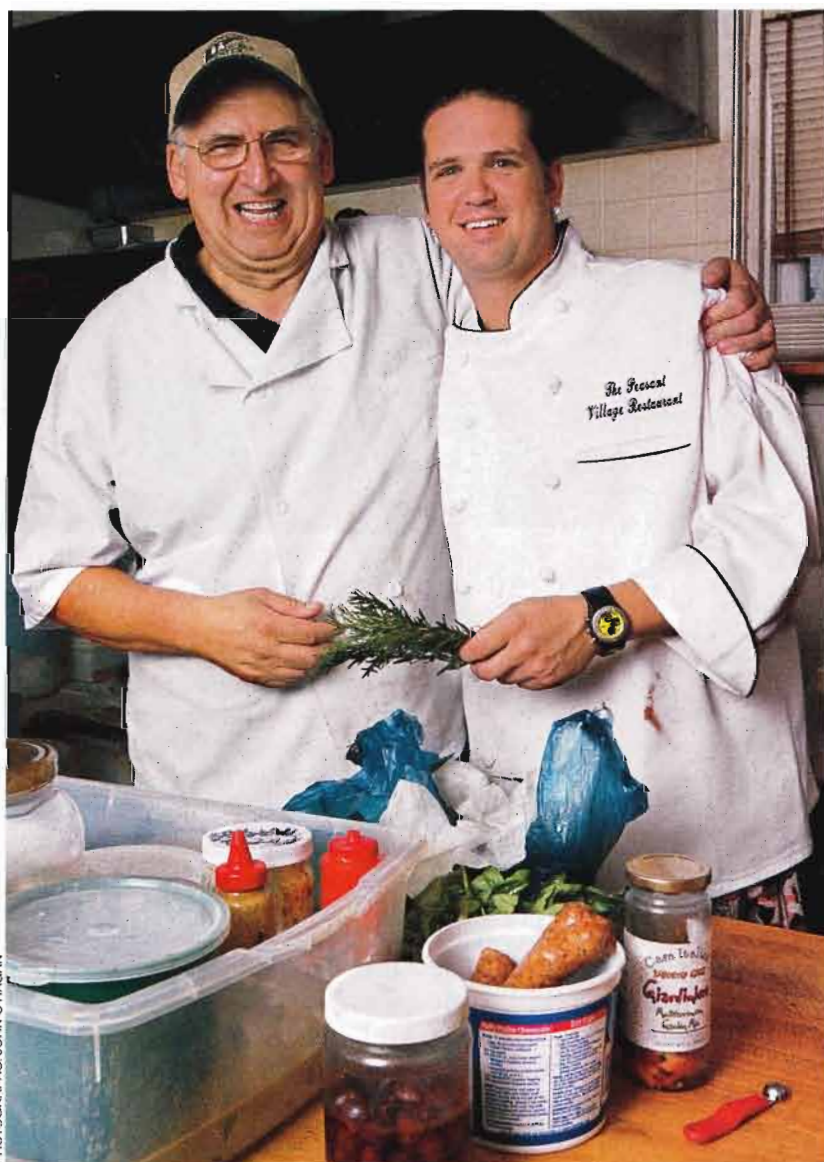
Born To Cook

With Carolina crab cakes, Ukranian beet soup, and a chicken dish from Crete, Jason and Art Helfer bring a world of cooking to San Angelo.

She told me she was listening to her biscuits.”

Jason Helfer, the 33-year-old chef and co-owner of The Peasant Village Restaurant in San Angelo, smiles at the memory as he makes bread pudding early one morning. While a student at Johnson & Wales University in Charleston, South Carolina, he served under the tutelage of Edna Lewis, the venerable conscience of Southern cooking who admired the young Texan's respect for culinary tradition.

“Edna bent her head down to the oven,” Jason recalls, “and said, ‘I’m listening for my biscuits, to see if they’re done.’ She said she could hear a high-pitched sound when the bubbles start releasing air. I thought, ‘You’ve got to be kidding.’ But the one time she opened the oven door, the biscuits were absolutely perfect.”



PHOTOGRAPHS: JOHN O'HAGAN



Jason recently received the 200-year-old family recipe book.

Jason knows a thing or two about listening. Each generation of his family mentors the next, side-by-side in the kitchen, teaching by example and from the yellowing pages of hand-me-down recipes. The mentor he loves best works right beside him. In 1995, soon after he returned from Charleston, Jason and his father opened The Peasant Village Restaurant in a 1927 bungalow near downtown. Today, with the son's nouvelle cuisine and the father's old-world foods, diners in the middle of West Texas can ride a wider range of culinary choice.

What? No Brown Texas Foods?

Father and son fired up their kitchen early this morning. Both wear white chef's coats. Art cooks in a bill cap, while Jason sports silver earrings and

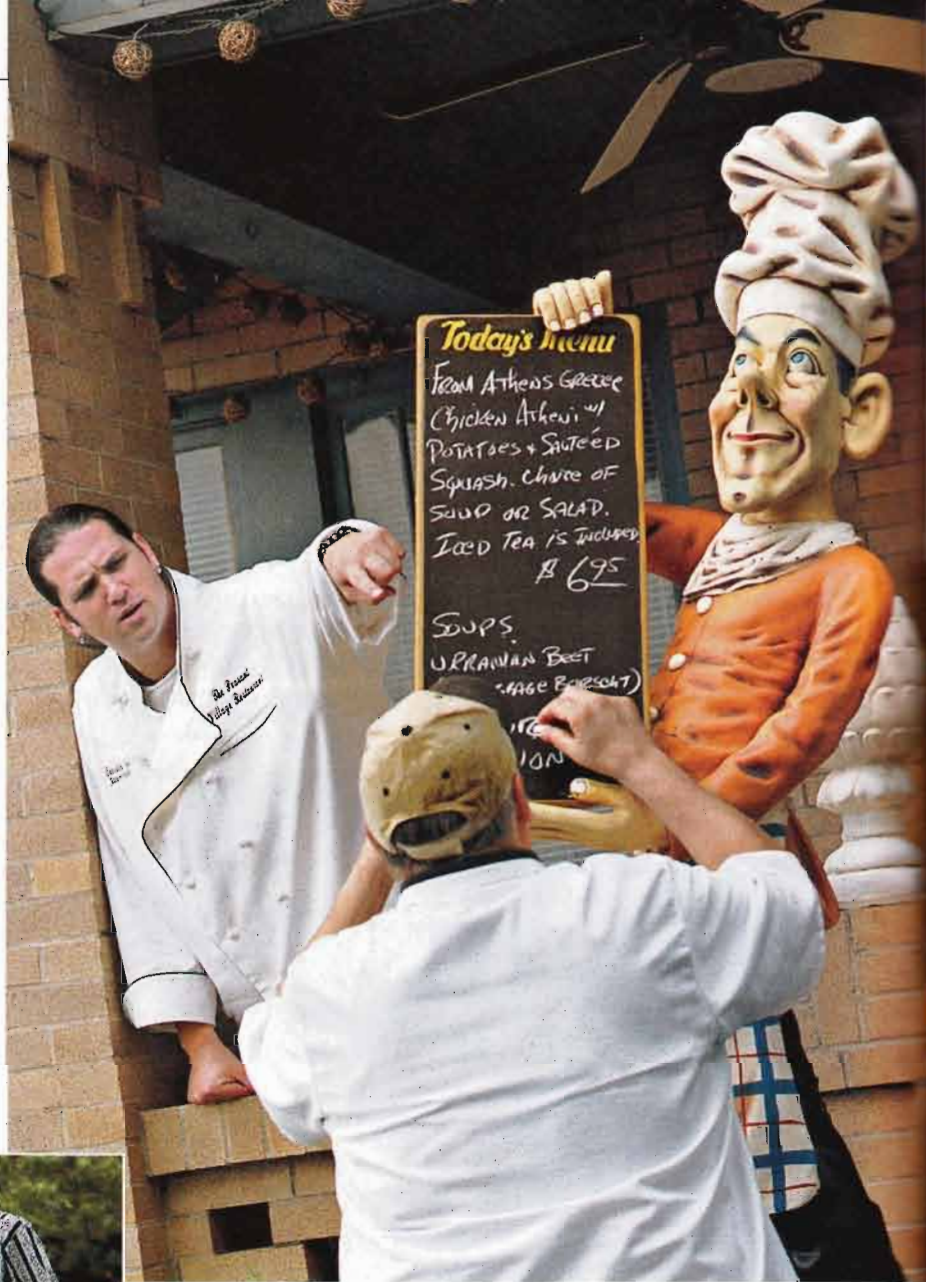
“My dad said, ‘Son, I want to open a restaurant with you,’ ” recalls Jason Helfer, right, with his father, Art, at their Peasant Village Restaurant.

a cross. ("In memory of Mom. She loved crosses," he says softly.)

By noon, couples, business associates, and personnel from Goodfellow Air Force Base scan the day's blackboard menu. They may start with Ukrainian beet soup, then choose entrées such as Chicken Atheni with potatoes and sautéed squash; Shrimp Cajun Angels (bacon-wrapped shrimp on a skewer); seared tuna with pesto

right: "My family is like a mesquite tree; our roots are pretty deep," says Jason.

below: The Helpers bring new tastes to a city that loves steaks and barbecue.



Jason and his wife, Nicole, take their dogs, Agin and Peanut Butter, for a romp in the park.

"He knew my passion was cooking, and cooking is his life too."

Jason Helfer

sauce; Carolina Crab Cakes with Dijonaise; grilled mahi mahi with sun-dried tomato-and-artichoke sauce; and Peasant Chicken with pico de gallo. They

may end lunch with bread pudding (made with French bread); crème brûlée; or Jason's cheesecake, a triple-flavored treat of chocolate, caramel, and ganache.

From the kitchen door, Jason nods at two women mopping up the last of

their cheesecake. "Often, their husbands send them over to spy, to see if it's okay," he says, smiling. The women's mission is to sniff out anything resembling Mexican, chicken-fried steak, or barbecue. "If I offered chicken-fried steak and things like that, I'd have them lined out the door," he says.

Jason and Art chalk "steak" on their blackboard menu, but they like to guide West Texans beyond their beloved brown Texas foods. Some are a little reluctant.

“[Chicken Atheni] came from my landlady in Crete. She got it from her mother who was 100 at the time....”

Art Helfer



Diners fill three rooms and the bungalow's front porch.

“One woman brought her meat-and-potatoes husband in here by pliers to his teeth,” Jason recalls. “He ordered steak and said it was the best he had ever had. Next time he had seafood. He never had steak again. Many guys think the restaurant is just for ladies, but we focus on food for everybody.”

Two Cooks in the Kitchen

Father and son seemingly spent their lives preparing for this endeavor. Art, a Pennsylvania native who came here for training at Goodfellow, worked most of his Air Force intelligence career overseas. When he was off duty

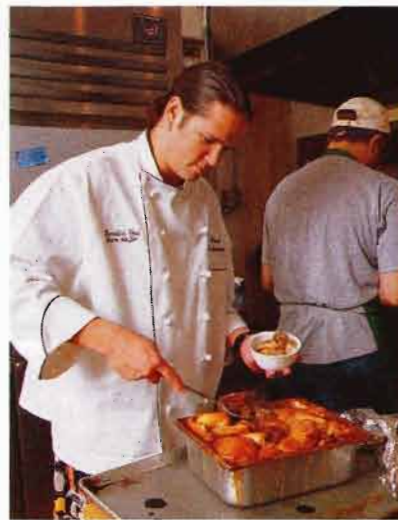
he haunted local kitchens and unearthed vintage recipes, such as the one for his Chicken Atheni. “This came from my landlady in Crete,” he recalls. “She got it from her mother who was 100 at the time, so the recipe is at least 100 years old.”

While Art trained himself in the kitchen, Jason (who was born in England) scampered underfoot. “I pulled on my dad’s pants leg and said, ‘I don’t want to be a doctor or a fireman. I want to be a chef.’ I started cooking at age 5,” he recalls.

Jason finished high school here, then traveled east to Charleston. That’s when San Angelo almost lost him forever. Chef Scott Peacock, as famous in the Southeast as Dean Fearing in Southwest, offered him a position at the prestigious Horseradish Grill in Atlanta.

Coming Home to San Angelo

As a Peacock protégé, Jason could have found acclaim as a big-city chef. Instead, he came home, married Nicole (whom he knew in high school), and made his father very



happy. “Dad said, ‘Son, I really want to open a restaurant with you,’” Jason recalls. “He knew my passion is cooking, and cooking is his life too.”

While the two respect each other’s talents, they remain father and son. “We work well together, most of the time,” Jason says with a chuckle. “There are times I tell him to get the heck out of the kitchen. He tells me, ‘I’m still your father. Go take a nap.’”

Both seem genetically linked to the sizzle and clatter of a kitchen. Just the day before, a treasured heirloom, a book of hand-written recipes passed down in the family since the 1700s, arrived from Pennsylvania. It came to Jason upon the death of his grandmother. In a mid-afternoon lull, father and son sit together and trace their fingers over the flowing cursive and pained printed letters of recipes, such as potato dumplings, sauerbraten, Swedish pancakes, and apple butter.

Art and Jason are compiling their own cookbook. Meanwhile, Jason hosts cooking classes and mentors youngsters. “I tell them everything starts with your passion, your heart, and your desire,” he says. “Once you’ve got that going, put that fire underneath your feet, and people will follow.” That’s good advice for aspiring young chefs, who may one day watch Jason listening to his biscuits.

GARY D. FORD

The Peasant Village Restaurant: 23 South Park, San Angelo, TX 76901; (325) 655-4811. **Hours:** 11 a.m.-2 p.m. Tuesday-Friday, 6-9:30 p.m. Tuesday-Saturday.

“We’ve survived because we offer things you don’t get anywhere else,” Jason says.

Wine, Cheese, Manicure

Nicole Helfer recently opened The Secret Vineyard Day Spa in a vintage house beside the restaurant. She offers manicures (you sip wine and nibble chocolate-dipped strawberries during the treatment), pedicures, facials, and full body massages. Clients may then purchase spa items or step into the Chef Jason’s Pantry for wine and cheese. Call (325) 655-3541.