

### Already a hit in Andover, chef takes his culinary skills to TV studio

Yella owner's fare impressed 'Today' producer

By **Katheleen Conti**  
GLOBE STAFF

**A**NDOVER — Chef Carlo Berdahn is a perfectionist.

From falafel to lamb chops, no plate makes it to the dining tables at Yella Grille in Andover without Berdahn's approval.

A lifelong picky eater, Berdahn, 34, has tinkered with the traditional Lebanese fare of his childhood to make it stand out above the rest. Nearly two years since he and his wife, Danielle, opened Yella (Arabic for "Come on, let's go") on Post Office Avenue with little fanfare, word-of-mouth recommendations have made the restaurant the "it" place to go.

Berdahn recalls the moment he realized they had made an impression on the community when, while walking behind a mother and her children on his way to the restaurant, one of the youngsters caught a whiff of something tasty and turned to his mom, proclaiming, "it must be coming from Yella."

"He already knew the name and we'd been here for just a year," Berdahn said on a recent afternoon at his restaurant.

Airy, warm, and intimate, Yella has become the spot where one expecting couple chose to open their ultrasound results; a husband and wife chose to eat before her weekly chemotherapy treatments; and countless others have celebrated birthdays and anniversaries. So when a producer for NBC's "Today" show, visiting the area in February on personal business, asked locals

where was the best place to eat, he ended up at Yella.

By the time the producer's party of 11 was done eating, he asked Berdahn if he would like to go to New York and do a cooking segment on the show.

"We thought he was joking," Berdahn said. "At the beginning, I couldn't believe it."

Berdahn is scheduled to appear on the show tomorrow, tentatively slated for 9:50 a.m. With the segment centered around healthy summertime recipes, Berdahn will demonstrate two traditional Lebanese dishes and a drink for the show's 5 million to 6 million viewers.

First, he will prepare a fattoush salad, which has parsley, mint, tomatoes, and cucumbers, with a homemade dressing. For an entree, he will go with salmon in a tomato, cumin, cilantro, and cinnamon reduction. He also will introduce one of Yella's most popular drinks, the homemade iced tea. It includes mint and a hint of cinnamon.

Both Berdahn and his wife, a Woburn native, are excited about his appearance, but neither knows what will truly come from it.

"I live the moment," Berdahn said. "So I don't know what's going to happen yet, but I hope something good. We work hard, me and my wife. We come here at 7 in the morning, we leave like at 11 p.m., and we do it not just to do it. We try to do it right; everything [must be] perfect."

Living in the moment and striving for perfection go hand in hand with Berdahn's upbringing in Lebanon. He was born in Beirut and grew up with an older brother and sister and a younger brother. His father was often on the road, delivering goods from country to country in his 18-wheel truck. His mother, who had three of the children by 22, stayed home. At around the time Berdahn was 3,



PHOTOS BY MATTHEW J. LEE/GLOBE STAFF

**Chef Carlo Berdahn cooks lamb chops at Yella, his Andover restaurant. Tomorrow, he will create healthy Lebanese dishes on a segment of NBC's "Today" show.**

his family moved to Tripoli in the northern part of the country. They would eventually leave Lebanon to escape the persecution of Christians, Berdahn said. They were taken in by a Christian family in Syria, where they lived for two years, before moving back to Lebanon.

His parents, Berdahn said, worked very hard to provide for the children, ensuring that they had not just the best education, but also happy memories. Among those was cooking with his mother.

"I used to help my mom all the time in the kitchen," Berdahn said. "Sitting at the table is like going to church. It's very, very important. . . . For me, it was always exciting."

Whenever his mother prepared his favorite dish, stuffed grape leaves and lamb, he would have to leave the house to keep the grum-

bling in his stomach at bay during the two hours of cooking time.

Berdahn has taken everything he learned in his mother's kitchen with him on his career's journey.

"And then I just noticed him all the time," said Danielle, 29. "Every time we were together I'd say, 'What are you making today?'"

The two bought a house in



**"Sitting at the table is like going to church. It's very, very important,"** said Berdahn, 34, a native of Lebanon.

After culinary and hotel management classes, he began working at a five-star hotel in Beirut. While there, he became classically trained in seven cooking styles. He also tinkered with traditional dishes to make them his own. "To enjoy something, for me, it's got to be something like 'wow,'" Berdahn said. "So I try to make each dish, whatever it is, let the flavor stand out."

In search of "something different," Berdahn decided to move to the United States in August 2001 with a friend he knew on Cape Cod. He opened a cafe in Orleans, which he later sold. In 2007, while working for a Hingham catering company, he met Danielle.

At a catered event the two were working, she sampled a piece of a beef tenderloin Berdahn had prepared, and became so smitten with its flavor that she demanded to meet the chef.

Lynnfield in 2008, married in September 2009, and opened Yella two months later. His mother, whom he still calls for help with some recipes, flew in from Lebanon and was in the kitchen for the restaurant's opening.

Danielle Berdahn, who manages everything but the cooking at Yella, said they were lucky that the "Today" producer decided to dine there.

"When he came in, I didn't know how much he was going to follow through with [his offer], or what was going to happen from it, but I knew once he tasted [Carlo's] food that he was going to love it," she said.

"I think [Carlo] is a really well-kept secret. I think that people do not realize how amazing his food is until they come here."

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**Carlo and Danielle Berdahn opened Yella (Arabic for "Come on, let's go") on Post Office Avenue in Andover with little fanfare nearly two years ago. Word-of-mouth recommendations have made the restaurant a popular spot.**

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Yella: A Modern Mediterranean Grille