



Personal Chef Delivers Full Menu of Culinary Services



W BY DIANNA STAMPFLER

hen families head to northern Michigan for vacation, it is to escape the day-to-day activities back home and to simply kick back and relax. Often, dealing with meals is the last thing someone wants to deal with. Chef Kristin Karam is banking on that, literally.

A graduate of the Great Lakes Culinary Institute in Traverse City, Karam has carved out a niche market of offering fridge-stocking, menu planning and full meal preparation and event catering services for those who want to leave all the cooking behind.

Karam—who is of Lebanese descent—credits her grandmother for introducing her to the world of the culinary arts and her mother and “auntie” for instilling a love of entertaining with food.

“Grandma’s rooftop garden [in Detroit] faced the city airport, and we would harvest mint and tomatoes while watching the planes come in and out,” she says. “Sunday dinner was a feast—with hummus, tabbouleh, lamb grape leaves, fatoush salad and the beloved kibbeh nayeh.”

Since the age of 15, Karam has been working in restaurants—honing both her culinary and her people skills. In 1992, she moved to Traverse City. There, she landed a job and the up-and-coming “hip” restaurant Poppycock’s—one of the first in the area to focus on sourcing local to create healthy menu options. While getting plenty of hands-on, real-world experience, Karam also began taking classes at the Great Lakes Culinary Institute, where she graduated with honors in 2000.

After graduation, she’s served as General Manager of the Boat-house Restaurant on Old Mission Peninsula, working with former

Chef Michael Bauer to develop a destination restaurant.

With the renaissance of local wines as agricultural destinations, Karam landed a job as Innkeeper and Events Manager at the award-winning Black Star Farms Winery B&B in Suttons Bay. For nearly 10 years, she not only perfected her craft but established invaluable relationships and rooted herself as one of the area’s noted culinary event planners.

“Seeing all aspects of how a party is planned and carried out led me back to the kitchen,” says Karam, who launched K2 Edibles and Events in 2008 to offer personal chef and catering services for visitors and second-home owners in the area. Specializing in the techniques of cooking the ethnic foods she was lovingly raised on, she has built her business by word of mouth, one client at a time.

When hired for her personal chef experience, Karam is usually contracted for three or more days. Since each client’s requirements are different, she first meets with them to determine the wants, needs and any dietary restrictions before creating a customized menu. Then, Karam says, the spoiling of the guests can commence!

“Last summer, in Leland, I had a worked for the same family a few different times,” Karam shares. “Each time, they had a different group staying with them. Some nights, they wanted a very casual Leland-style picnic, in which we featured produce from the local’s farmers market and Baker’s Green Acres chicken. They also feasted on beet salad with Leelanau Cheese Fromage and roasted corn.”



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And what's hot in the menu planning world these days?
 "People want different, but not too different, and they want healthy. I am seeing a trend toward bringing in an ethnic twist to menus," Karam says. "People want to celebrate their heritage with others, and food is a great way to introduce others into a part of you."

Since this is northern Michigan, where a simple dinner for a family of five can quickly turn into a larger gathering of friends, Karam has to also be prepared for those who just drop by for an unexpected visit.

That means making sure the fridge and pantry are always stocked with plenty of fresh, healthy snacks and quick fixes for meals. This means Karam's homemade salsas and hummus, tabouleh, luben (yogurt) and cucumber, bean salads, cut vegetables and fruits, wraps and kibbeh (like a Lebanese meatloaf) and even pulled pork wraps with roasted vegetables and Brownwood Farms Crème Mustard.

"Each day I cook, I find out something else about them so I can surprise them with something new the next day," Karam says with a smile. "I find the most satisfying part of being welcomed into someone else's kitchen, is the feeling you get when you take them by surprise with the service. I walk out of most of my clients homes feeling like I made their week a bit easier—that I just took a bit of stress off of them."

Whether it's an intimate dinner for two, a casual family gathering for 20 or a grand wedding reception for 200, Karam delivers unparalleled culinary experience. Familiar with all aspects of the event planning process, Karam knows exactly how to get the job done right and has developed partnerships with others in the industry who can help her carry out even the most elaborate events.

"Last summer, one of my brides—who was an organic farmer in Benzie County—wanted to create an ethnic menu that celebrated others cooking techniques with the foods that she could grow," says Karam. "We had a paella station with the smells inviting guests to sip on cool gazpacho made with the bride's tomatoes, onions and cucumbers and fresh mint and cilantro."

Three different ethnic stations were set up at the reception, and guests traveled from station to station throughout the evening. That included a focus on Karam's own culinary heritage. Fresh local lamb was made into baked kibbeh with luben and tabbouleh along with her signature hummus. And grape leaves—lots of them. "We rolled over 500 grape leaves for that wedding," Karam recalls.

From gourmet picnics to stocking family fridges to full-blown, multi-course dinners and everything in between, Karam has done it all with great success. She also prepares and sells her ethnic creations, which are available in the deli case at The Underground Cheesecake Company in The Village at Grand Traverse Commons.

"You'll find a full line of Lebanese food packaged and ready for lunch, dinner, picnics, or to even take for appetizers to your next dinner party," she says.

And if that wasn't enough, Karam is also the Thursday night chef for Left Foot Charley Winery in The Village at Grand Travers Commons.

"Each week, we feature a different ethnic theme—ranging from Lebanese to Indian, to Cuban, to Polish and beyond." The menu is then paired with the award-winning wines crafted by winemaker Bryan Ulbrich. □



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