FEATURE

Cooks & Canines

Busy Reno-area chefs make time for their furry friends.

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Clockwise from left: Travis Stehman and Panda; Josh and Whitney Deri with Hyde and Mousse; Joseph Leberski with Buddy and Riley

TRAVIS STEHMAN AND PANDA

After attending the Truckee Meadows Community College culinary arts program, Travis Stehman began work with executive chef Ivano Centemeri at The Row's La Strada restaurant. During his time at La Strada, Stehman advanced to the sous chef position while also being employed part time with Josh and Whitney Deri at Blend Catering. He later worked as chef for Alberto Gazzola at La Vecchia in Reno.

"I'm very grateful to have learned from all of them," Stehman says of his time under the tutelage of noted local culinary talents.

With a foundation in Italian cuisine, he also incorporates Asian and Mediterranean flavor profiles into his current work as a private chef catering small gatherings and private dinners.

When Stehman and his girlfriend, Kimberley Mayes, moved in together, her teacup Yorkie, Panda, joined them.

"He's a good dog-o," Stehman says of his step pooch.

Panda loves his special kibble and salad. He'll sit up and squeak for a treat, earning his nickname, Squeak Toy Panda.

JOSEPH LEBERSKI, BUDDY, AND RILEY

As chef/culinary services director for Kiley Ranch Senior Living, Joseph Leberski draws from more than 38 years of culinary experience, including a stint at the New England Culinary Institute. Formerly the executive chef at Cascades of the Sierra in Spanish Springs, Leberski has spent the last 11 years focused on the senior community.

"Gone are the days/stigma of what senior dining was always thought to be," he says. "We concentrate now on freshly prepared from-scratch menus, catering to our residents' tastes and needs."

His dogs, Buddy, a Lab/pit bull mix, and Riley, a Jack Russell mix with a hint of Chihuahua, are rescues.

"My family likes to adopt rescues; they need families as much as any other dog, sometimes even more," Leberski says.

While both dogs share a taste for raw carrots, strawberries, and watermelon, Buddy has a nose for bags containing food, plastic sandwich bags, grocery sacks, and even bags of flour.

"Nothing like coming home to an opened bag of flour all over the floor," Leberski says.

WHITNEY AND JOSH DERI, HYDE, AND MOUSSE

Whitney and Josh Deri fell in love while at the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. After graduation, they headed west and worked for chefs in Napa Valley and San Francisco before settling in Reno.

"We started Blend Catering back in 2013. We always knew we wanted to work for ourselves and be able to have a family, so catering just really fit in with that," Whitney explains.

Having both grown up with Labradors, the Deris wanted one as a companion for their children. Siblings Hyde (ginger-colored male) and Mousse (chocolate-colored female) arrived at the Deri house as eight-week-old puppies.

"We planned on only getting one, but once we saw them, we knew we had to have two!" Whitney says.

Aside from Hyde's naughty habit of eating socks, the duo is an excellent addition to the Deri family; they're wonderful with people, especially children.

"Our Mousse is incredibly protective," she notes.

From left: Tom Marrin with Kane and Jimmy Lou; Christian and Kasey Christensen with Suki; Tim Meevasin with Rocky; Alyssa Starr and Rexx

TOM MARRIN, KANE, AND JIMMY LOU

A graduate of Northern Arizona University in hotel and restaurant management, Tom Marrin moved to Incline Village in 2001. After working at Northstar and Tahoe Mountain Club, Marrin further honed his culinary prowess under chefs David Lutz and Jason Poe at restaurants such as Wild Goose and Schaffer's Camp. He became the catering chef for Tahoe Mountain Club in Truckee. In 2007, he and Eric Barton opened the first Full Belly Deli in Truckee. The pair opened two additional locations in Reno and look forward to expanding their Nevada footprint.

About his dogs, Marrin says, "We didn't choose them; they chose us.

He and his girlfriend, Jovi, rescued Kane, a pit bull that was days away from being euthanized at the Winnemucca animal shelter.

Though Marrin had not planned on having two dogs, bichon Jimmy Lou soon joined the family. The odd canine couple often draws attention during walks.

"The restaurant industry can be very stressful and involves long hours. It's great to be able to spend time with the dogs," Marrin says. "Jovi and I live in an amazing area that caters to dogs that love to be out and about, swimming, hiking, and running amuck."

CHRISTIAN AND KASEY CHRISTENSEN AND SUKI

The Christensens met 22 years ago in Kauai when Kasey picked up a hitchhiker — Christian. The two have worked together for most of their careers in restaurants in Colorado, Hawaii, and Reno. After a stint operating their private chef business, the couple transitioned their weekly Soup Sundays with friends and family into Süp, an eatery in Reno featuring healthy gourmet soups, sandwiches, and salads in 2007. Having survived the logistical challenges of the pandemic and Midtown Reno's road construction, the pair looks forward to growing within Süp's current location.

"We plan to make our restaurant more sustainable and responsible in our community and hope to learn and inspire," Christian explains.

Drawn to the shiba inu breed for its size, adorable face, and curled tail, they saw photos of their friend's puppy and just had to see his siblings. The pair fell for Suki as soon as they met her.

"We weren't aware of the cat-like personality and the shiba scream, but that just adds to her character," Christian says of Suki.

TIM MEEVASIN AND ROCKY

Immediately after graduating from University of Nevada, Reno with his business degree, Tim Meevasin enrolled in culinary school. Though he had worked in a variety of professional kitchens, from bistros to catering companies, Meevasin longed to chart his own course, preparing menus inspired by his travel experiences. He studied paella in Valencia, Spain, and became hooked. Now based in Reno, Meevasin travels the surrounding areas, cooking authentic paella from scratch on giant carbon steel pans imported from Spain.

"It's been seven years of owning my own business, and I'm so thankful for my clients and the community," Meevasin says.

A few weeks after losing their beloved dog, Kona, during the pandemic, Meevasin and his wife, Lori, visited the Nevada Humane Society for a quick look. They spent the day with Rocky, an Anatolian shepherd mix.

"We had a newborn and a two-year-old at the time, and we knew it was going to be a disaster bringing home a big puppy, but we're huge animal lovers, and we couldn't have a home without a doggy," Meevasin explains.

Rocky went home with them and soon grew into 90 pounds of loveable goofiness, becoming their son Weston's best friend.

ALYSSA STARR AND REXX

After the birth of their daughter, River, Alyssa and Zac Starr wanted to lose the weight they both gained during her pregnancy, so they could enjoy a healthy, adventurous life with their child.

The new parents began meal prepping to shed the excess pounds. Their personal endeavor soon turned professional. In 2018, Alyssa left her corporate chef job at a local ski resort, and the pair rented a professional kitchen on weekends and started Mother of Macros, a meal-prep service that provides busy families and professionals a healthy, time-efficient way to savor their favorite meals.

Now Mother of Macros is a nationwide company with a 10,000-square-foot facility in Reno and a staff of 28.

"I like to consider myself a 'fit chef' by creating meals that are delicious but will empower your body to operate at its maximum potential," Starr explains.

Checking out a litter of hyper goldendoodle puppies, Alyssa was immediately drawn to a sad-eyed pup in need of a cuddle. She scooped him up, and he snuggled into her neck, nestling his nose in her hair.

"I just knew he was the one. We've been inseparable ever since," she says of Rexx.

Today, Rexx goes camping and hiking with his family. He only resorts to sad eyes when he catches the aroma of popcorn, his favorite snack.

Susan Winters has fond memories of her Corky, a cocker mix who kept watch in the kitchen whenever her grandma cooked chicken.