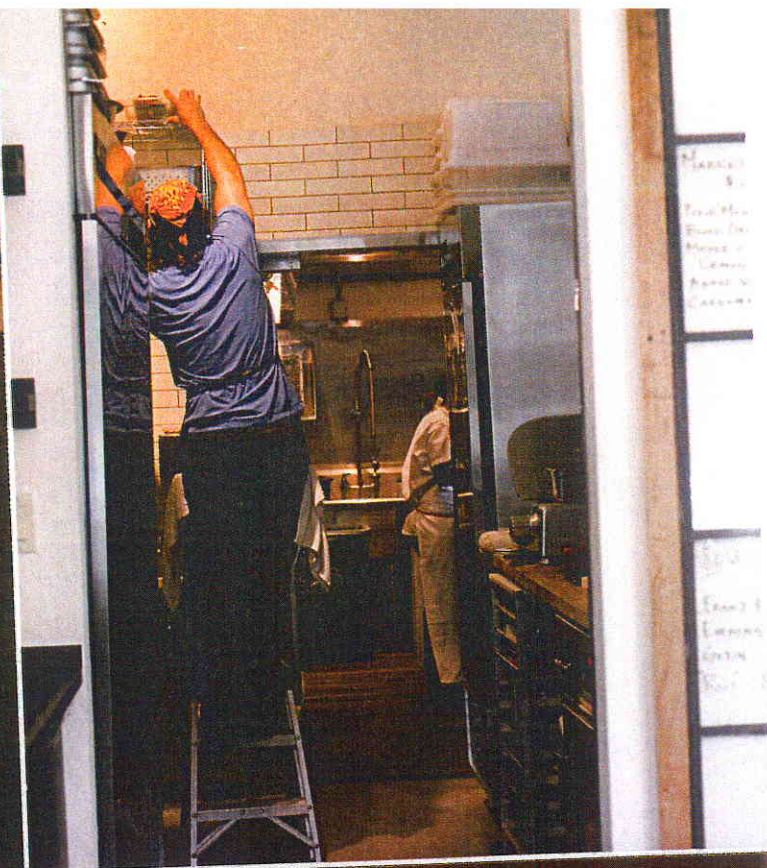


# Grandma Would Smile

**KITCHEN SPY** INSPIRED BY HER GRANDMOTHER'S HOSPITALITY, MELISSA PERELLO COBBLES TOGETHER A COZY, PERSONAL SAN FRANCISCO RESTAURANT FILLED WITH BUDGET-CONSTRAINED EFFICIENCIES. CAROLYN JUNG REPORTS. PHOTOS BY JENNIFER MARTINÉ. ►





Clockwise from top left: Squeezed for space, Perello works with an undercounter Cvap cook and hold oven; cooks make use of every inch available; no liquor, no problem: wine-based cocktails are listed on window-frame eraser board behind the small bar; Perello's kitchen line, basic but effective; wine storage built into the dining room wall; graduated beakers measure the house red blend of Syrah, Zinfandel, Petite Syrah, and Viognier sold by the ounce.



Frances, the woman, was what we all dream of in a grandma—an aw-shucks, no-nonsense, Paula Deen-esque character who'd welcome visitors with a warm hug of just-baked cookies, homemade bread, and shards of her famous buttery peanut brittle no family gathering was ever without.

Frances, the namesake restaurant, is what chefs fantasize about in this tough economy—a cozy, no-frills establishment built on sweat, heart, and a few dollars that has won over both blasé San Franciscans with its applewood smoked bacon beignets with maple crème fraîche and chives and hand-etched beakers of house wine imbibed by the ounce.

What Frances, the woman, and Frances, the restaurant, share in common is **Melissa Perello**. The wispy 33 year old chef shone in the rarified sphere of fine dining under the tutelage of San Francisco chef heavyweights **Michael Mina** and **Ron Siegel**. But after working nearly nonstop in that world since graduating from The Culinary Institute of America, Perello flamed out. After service on New Year's Eve 2006 at the tony **Fifth Floor** in San Francisco, she hung up her executive chef's coat for what she thought would be the final time. She fled to Italy and New Zealand, where the pressures of crafting clever amuse-bouches and meeting the expectations of demanding, well-heeled diners drifted far, far away.

Frances, the restaurant, which opened on a quiet edge of San Francisco's flamboyant Castro District on December 1, 2009, marks Perello's return to cooking, but in a much different manner. It's named after Perello's grandmother, whom she spent summers with in Wichita Falls, Texas, as a little girl, learning to cook by her side. Frances, the restaurant, embodies Grandma Frankie's easygoing nature and unfussy approach to food with the likes of duck breast with butter bean ragoût, and grilled calamari with preserved lemon and pickled currants.

"I wasn't enjoying fine dining any more," Perello says. "I wanted to cook the food I wanted to eat every night. This feels freer. We have regulars in the neighborhood who come in two to three times a week. Coming from fine dining, that's a nice and new experience for me."

Perello looked at approximately 30 properties in San Francisco before finally finding what she was looking for in this former Filipino eatery, so compact that the entire place is smaller than the high-end dining rooms for which she once cooked. She saw past the gaudy purple and orange walls that were there in the L-shaped, barely 600-square-foot bar and dining area. Then, she took a deep breath as she stepped inside the kitchen, which at less than 500 square feet, is not much bigger than one in a roomy condo. She feared it might be the deal-breaker.

But Perello pressed on, leasing the space as is and willing herself to make it work. With the help of a few investors, she poured

\$75,000 into plumbing and electrical upgrades for the kitchen and dining room, which included new insulation for the drafty old building, double-pane windows, and a larger water heater. She sunk another \$22,000 into new kitchen equipment.

She also hired architect Michael Baushke, whose Apparatus Architecture in San Francisco had designed only one other restaurant before—the expansive **Ubuntu** in Napa. His primary expertise is in residential remodels, which actually proved fortuitous. "Frances was almost like doing a residential remodel," Baushke says of the snug, 45 seat restaurant. "You're limited by a lot of parameters. It becomes a puzzle to solve, to make it seem bigger than it really is."

Baushke did that by giving the restaurant a spare look. During three months of remodeling, sheet rock was hung over the existing lofty ceiling that was a mishmash of different woods. The walls and new ceiling were painted off-white to give it a more airy feel and contiguous look. Small steel directional lights, modern yet unobtrusive, were mounted in two rows running the length of the narrow dining room.

Perello enlisted her mother and father, too. Her father, who once taught high school wood shop and had his own construction company, acted in part as her contractor. He built the long wooden banquette that spans one wall of the dining room, as well as the bathroom cabinet and some of the shelves. Her mother sewed all the aprons for the waitstaff as well as the throw pillows for the banquette, lined with tables set barely an elbow's width apart.

The eco-conscious and frugal chef also tried to reuse as much of the bric-a-brac left behind by the previous tenants as possible, including the mahogany-colored dining room chairs, which were repolished, and the flatware and china, which weren't necessarily to her taste but would do in a pinch. She scoured eBay to score espresso machine parts, wine cabinets, and computer equipment. Her father tore apart an old oak cabinet to repurpose the wood for shallow storage boxes to hold napkins and cutlery. An old glass windowpane, hung up behind the small bar, became an instant found-art wipe board to list the day's specialty drinks in black marker.

To hold down costs down in the kitchen, the existing hood and exhaust systems were retained, as was the large side-by-side refrigerator. Perello always envisioned her restaurant as having a short market-driven menu. That turned out to be almost a necessity, though, because the tiny kitchen has no walk-in.

The old range was replaced by a used six-burner Montague. A Montague salamander, a half-size Garland convection oven, and two undercounter refrigerators also were added. Perello installed a combi oven, giving her the capacity to roast meats and hold them to a precise temperature throughout service. She'd love to serve roasted chicken but doesn't have the oven capacity. She'd like

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— MELISSA PERELLO

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to offer a more extensive cheese selection, too, but lacks the storage space.

As it is, the “office” is basically a cave at the dead-end of a tight hallway that can barely accommodate a computer and a chair. During prep, her seven person kitchen team is forced to spill out onto the bar to do their work. Her pastry chef, relegated to a rolling stainless-steel cart that gets tucked under a counter when not in use, must constantly dodge servers filling orders at the adjacent espresso machine during service.

“There is no private place in this restaurant,” Perello says with a laugh. “We call this place ‘chutes and ladders’ because we have to store everything up, up, up. And I have a lot of short people who work for me.”

She’ll be the first to admit that it’s not her dream kitchen by any means. But she’s proud—even a bit dazed—by how successful the restaurant has grown so quickly, including its James Beard Foundation nomination this year for Best New Restaurant. Siegel of **The Dining Room at The Ritz-Carlton San Francisco**, who

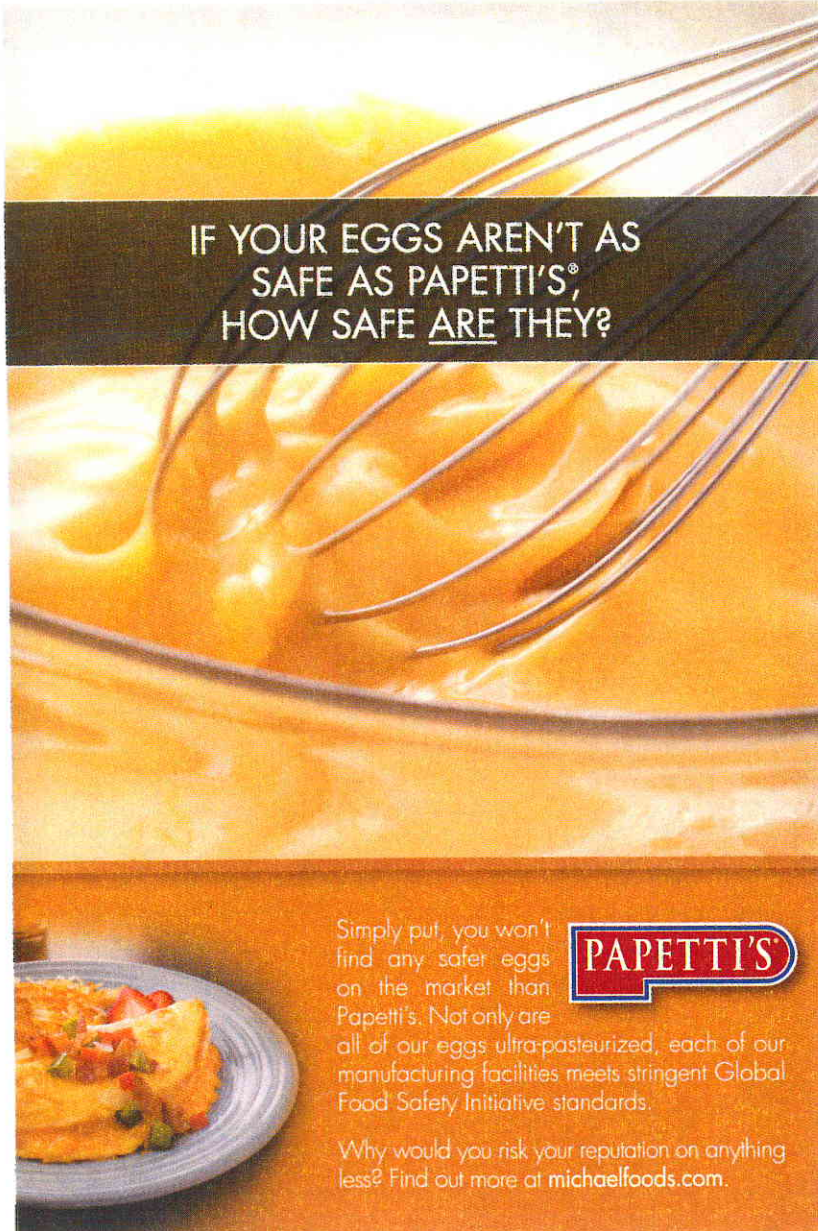
mentored Perello when she was his sous chef at Charles Nob Hill, is not surprised. Just before Frances opened, Siegel brought Perello a gift of lemons and herbs from his backyard and saw a restaurant taking shape that was emblematic of both the gritty determination and sunny personality he has come to know.

“The restaurant is hip, casual, comfortable, friendly, and feminine—like she is,” he says. “There are a lot of people in this industry who bust their ass but don’t get the time of day. I look at this, and I think, ‘Good for her!’”

Just what would Frances, the woman, think of Frances, the restaurant? Although her grandmother passed away six years ago, Perello’s pretty sure she knows what her reaction would have been, from the big spray of fresh flowers at the bar down to the timeworn metal milk pail in the bathroom that hails from Nebraska, where her Grandma Frankie was born.

“She’d be psyched,” Perello says. “It’s a little more modern looking than her style. The welcoming feeling, though—that’s all her.”

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*Carolyn Jung*, a former food writer for the *San Jose Mercury News*, now blogs at [FoodGal.com](http://FoodGal.com).



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## Equipment

Blender **Vita-Mix**

Charbroiler **Wolf**

Convection oven (half-size)

**Garland/U.S. Range**

Cvap cook and hold oven **Winston**

**Industries**

Ice maker **Manitowoc**

Meat slicer **Sirman**

Mixer **KitchenAid**

Range/convection oven **Montague**

Refrigeration **True**

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