

## **Executive Chef Brings 5-Star Expertise to Family Business/Branson Hammergren Words 1000**

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**By Jill Branson Hammergren**

If you've got a hankering for fresh seafood, you probably pile into the car for a trip to one of North Carolina's great beach communities. Well, landlubbers, listen up! Now, you can get the freshest seafood year 'round in North Carolina's Triangle area. Not only that, you'll experience some culinary flair from Chef Dan.

Chef Dan Hieronymus puts his 5-Star/5-Diamond expertise to work as the Executive Chef at his family-owned Hieronymus® Seafood Restaurant & Fresh Market in Cary.

When he was about 10 years old, Dan started commercial fishing with his father, Captain Glenn Hieronymus. At the same time, he started helping out in the kitchen at the family's Wilmington restaurant. That's where Hieronymus says he learned cooking basics. Even though those chefs knew their craft, he felt they lacked any creativity. After high school, Hieronymus sought out experience from other regional chefs. In 1994, Dan decided to seek out specialized chef training at Johnston and Wales University in Charleston, SC. "That two-year program really pumped up my food and culinary awareness," said Hieronymus.

Hieronymus returned once again to the family restaurant to expand his culinary repertoire. In 1998, he got the opportunity to hone his skills even more, at The Greenbrier, the renowned 5-Diamond Resort in White Sulphur Springs, West Virginia. The following year, he went back to teach some of the intern chefs during the golf season. Every year since then, he's been invited to return, but his schedule doesn't always permit that.

After surviving eight recent hurricanes, Captain Glenn and his wife, Chef Marlene Hieronymus decided to sell their Wilmington restaurant as a franchise. But it wasn't until

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hurricanes Fran and Floyd that the Hieronymus family decided to move inland. Last year, they brought the company, which for more than 30 years, has been synonymous with fresh seafood and produce at the coast to Cary. Today, Hieronymus® Seafood Restaurant & Fresh Market gets the freshest seafood from its own fishing trawlers off located off the North Carolina Outer Banks and down around the Cape Fear region. It also has oyster gardens toward the Pamlico Sound. Several times a week, Captain Glenn travels up and down the coast to bring back the haul for Chef Dan to prepare and sell. He also makes stops at a network of family-owned farms, seeking out the heartiest produce to offer in the Fresh Market.

Quality and safety are hallmarks of the Hieronymus family's business. They've even developed their own quality seal of approval known as Certified Hieronymus®, which means everything served or sold in the restaurant and fresh market is chemical and bacteria free. "I know where all my boats get their fish. I am very selective about who and where I get everything. You have to be. Some commercial fishermen aren't too careful about how they handle the fish before it goes to market. I get my fish from only the best," said Captain Glenn Hieronymus. Since he's been in this industry for more than 30 years, state inspectors often rely on his knowledge and expertise about certain fishing practices.

At the restaurant and fresh market, you'll also find a variety of wines, gifts, along with catering and cooking classes. Throughout the year, Chef Marlene, Dan's mother, offers several types of classes for every level of cooking abilities.

The food at Hieronymus® Seafood Restaurant & Fresh Market is authentic Cape Fear Cuisine with an emphasis on grilled, sautéed or blackened techniques rather than fried. Chef Dan says his style shares Mediterranean and French influences. "I like to lightly season things so the fish isn't overpowered." One of his favorite seasonings is his signature, Chef Dan's Fish

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Rub, which is a blend of spices. He admits to using it on a lot of his dishes, even non-seafood items.

Chef Dan's ability to think on his feet while cooking is what he calls a tremendous asset, "I often stand in our walk-in cooler and look for inspiration." He encourages all cooks to be flexible and open to experimentation while in the kitchen. "I believe you cannot be limited. You can prepare things 100 different ways. You have to find your own flair and improvise. I guess it's the Boy Scout in me, you know, if you forget something on a camping trip in the scouts, you improvise. I do the same in the kitchen. You've got to work with what you've got. You have to find your own creativity in your pantry."

Both Chef Dan and Chef Marlene share a unique philosophy. They believe there's really no mystery to preparing seafood. "Anything you can do with beef or chicken, you can do with seafood," said Chef Marlene. "I started cooking seafood because of our commercial seafood business. People didn't know what to do with the fish. The fishermen couldn't sell it because people didn't know how to prepare it. We helped them all learn." She says people often come into the market looking to buy seafood, but they don't have a clue about how to fix it. "They're often intimidated by it. There are so many newcomers to North Carolina who moved here from other coastal regions. They're always looking for Cod and other fish not native to the North Carolina coast. I try to introduce them to the types of fish caught here and then educate them on ways to prepare it." The types of fish and seafood found on a regular basis at Hieronymus® Seafood & Fresh Market include sushi-grade Yellow Fin Tuna, Jumbo Wahoo, Golden Tilefish, Grouper, Flounder, Hognosed Snapper, shrimp, crabs, clams and other seafood and shellfish caught right off the North Carolina coast.

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Seafood continues to be a staple all across the U.S. According to the National Marine Fisheries Service estimates Americans consume nearly 16 pounds of fresh seafood a year. That puts the U. S. at third in the world for seafood consumption. Only China and Japan consume more fish than we do. You know, that's great news for Hieronymus® Seafood Restaurant & Fresh Market.

Hieronymus Seafood Restaurant & Fresh Market is located at 815 W. Chatham St. in Cary, NC. Jill Branson Hammergren is a writer, producer & media consultant in Raleigh.