

# Food+Wine

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**Wine** | Laurie Daniel on the excellent pinot noir emerging from the Chalona appellation.

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## A stand-up guy

Spanek Vertical Roaster was modeled after the Eiffel Tower

25 million have been sold worldwide

Celebrity fans: Jerry Rice, Dom DeLuise and Danny Kaye



Denis Spanek, above, is out to convert the world to the vertical roaster his parents invented in the 1950s.

### Saratoga man champions benefits of cooking with his family's vertical roaster

By Carolyn Jung  
*Mercury News*

Denis Spanek is not ashamed. He only likes to do it vertically. And he's out to convert the world to his peculiar predilection.

He means roasting a chicken, of course. Spanek, 60, of Saratoga, can't help himself. He is the torchbearing heir to what is considered the first vertical poultry roaster ever manufactured. His parents, who emigrated from Paris and eventually settled in Burlingame, modeled the design of the Spanek Vertical Roaster ingeniously and sentimentally after the Eiffel Tower. Since the first one was crafted in 1956, Spanek says, more than 25 million have been sold worldwide.

The \$16.95 tempered steel wire frame, which supports a whole chicken upright in a roasting pan in the oven or on an outdoor grill, has the ability to produce incredibly moist and juicy meat.

It has been Spanek's poulet passport to becoming a multimillionaire, a world traveler who has dined at the White House and a friend to a who's who of celebrities who have embraced the vertical way.

Former San Francisco 49ers wide receiver Jerry Rice is a disciple. So is comedian Dom DeLuise, who co-wrote with Spanek a pamphlet-size cookbook of vertical roaster recipes. And actor Danny Kaye was such a fan of the roasters that he used to show up at food trade shows to help Spanek hawk them. The

#### RECIPES

Basic Spanek vertical roasted chicken, plus variations

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#### Where to buy Spanek Vertical Roasters

**Chefworks**, 1527 Pacific Ave., Santa Cruz  
**Cook's Junction**, 261 Main St., Los Altos  
**Cosentino's**, 3521 Homestead Road, Santa Clara  
**Draeger's**, 1010 University Drive, Menlo Park; 342 First St., Los Altos  
**Gene's Fine Foods**, 18850 Cox Ave., Saratoga  
**PW Markets** (all Bay Area locations)  
**Spanek online store**, [www.spanek.com](http://www.spanek.com)  
**Sur La Table** (all locations)  
**Wisnom's**, 545 First Ave., San Mateo



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

The vertical roaster is equally useful for roasting a full-size chicken, center, or the smaller game hens, rear.

## If peas aren't farm fresh, use frozen

By Stephanie Witt Sedgwick

*Special to the Washington Post*

Peas peaked early. All the rage in 17th- and 18th-century Europe, thanks to the development of tender, sweet varieties in England, they lost their luster by the 20th. Between the cafeteria cooks and the cans, both of which turned them to mush, peas became anything but chic.

The rise of their sexy edible-pod cousins, the snow pea and sugar snap pea, didn't help.

#### RECIPES

Sweet baby pea and potato salad  
Shrimp, andouille and sweet pea "paella"

BACK PAGE

But the pea's biggest problem is this: Farmers are hundreds of miles from most markets that carry their produce, and peas aren't good travelers. Though the pods themselves can withstand picking, shipping and refrigeration, the peas inside suffer mightily.

Hours after picking, the sugar that makes a pea so sweet starts to turn to starch. Peas picked one day, then shipped to supermarkets and sold days later, are sad shadows of the sweet packets that were pulled from the vine.

In an age when fresh vegetables are touted as lifesavers and restaurants are built around the fresh-from-the-farm concept, here's the radi-

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#### upcoming reviews

**Thursday in Eye:** A Quick Bite at Super Taqueria in San Jose.

**Sunday in LifeStyle:** Morton's The Steakhouse in San Jose. Left, upside-down apple pie.

**You be the reviewer:** Have you been to Osteria in Palo Alto? Go to [www.mercurynews.com/restaurants](http://www.mercurynews.com/restaurants) by Monday, read Aleta Watson's review, then contribute your own thoughts about the restaurant. Please include your full name and city. We will print a selection of comments in the April 29 LifeStyle section.

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# SPANEK | Vertical taste advocate

Continued from Page 1F

casual-dining chain Houston's has cooked chickens with them. So has the luxurious Connaught Hotel in London.

"People laughed at it before," Spanek says. "People are less skeptical about it now. It was just a matter of educating them."

No person could possibly spread that gospel better than Spanek. Spend any time with him and he is swept up by a major force of nature. Talking a mile a minute, and barely pausing for breath, the gregarious Spanek is an infomercial come to life. With his gift for gab, he could sell Kobe beef to vegetarians — and make them grateful they stepped over to the dark side.

## Family restaurant

His mother, Anna, was a Cordon Bleu-trained chef; his father, George, an electrical engineer. From 1961 to 1972, the couple and their two sons operated Chez Anna in Burlingame. The family-style French bistro was a favorite of Bing Crosby, who owned a house in nearby Hillsborough. Like other patrons, Spanek recalls, Crosby was drawn to the cafe's convivial spirit — and to its roast chicken, the signature dish that was cooked in a novel way.

Of Czechoslovakian heritage, Anna Spanek was none too pleased with the chickens sold at supermarkets here. Because they were stored on ice or in water, she thought they retained far too much water. To drain the liquid before cooking, Anna Spanek began to stand the chickens upright.

To keep the bird vertical as it cooked, she asked her husband to fashion an "Eiffel Tower" out of wire. Denis Spanek still has the original prototypes his father made, which look remarkably similar to the modern-day version.

After his mother died of cancer, the restaurant closed. And the wonders of the vertical roaster remained known only to devotees until Spanek's friends urged him to market the unique culinary tool to a wider audience in his mother's memory. After patenting the design, he and his older brother launched the privately owned Spanek Inc. in 1976, and set out to make the world more vertical.

These days, with the popularity of beer-can chicken, the notion of cooking a chicken upright is not so farfetched. But decades ago, it wasn't such an easy sell. Spanek learned that a vertical roaster just sitting on a store shelf baffled people. What they needed was to see it in action.

So the San Jose State University graduate, with degrees in business, marketing and real estate, began to demonstrate the roaster on television on QVC, at supermarkets and gourmet cookware stores, and at food industry trade shows. Ever the showman, he'd don an apron that read, "Spanek Magic, Enjoy Doing It Vertically." Then he'd "carve" the roasted chicken using a whole raw carrot to show just how easily the toothsome meat slipped off the carcass.

As a real estate agent, Spanek also would cook a chicken dinner for the new owners of every house he sold. And he'd throw in a free vertical roaster, to boot.

"Referrals are the name of the game in real estate," Spanek says. "Lots of Realtors give wine or flowers. You drink the wine, and it's gone. The flowers die. I'd give people a roaster and cook them a chicken. It was like doing a private demo. And they didn't forget me."

## Another legacy

Now his son, Sean, 31, who runs the family real estate business, does the same whenever he sells a house. And Spanek's wife, Shirley, 59, a former teacher at Prospect High School in Saratoga, helps her husband write recipes and promotional materials.

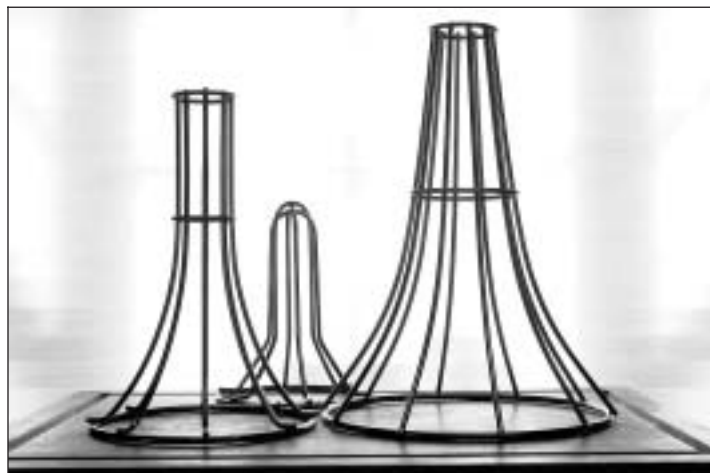
Spanek runs the business out of a cottage in his back yard. A three-person distribution center is in Texas. The vertical roasters are shaped and welded in Mexico, then industrial-plated in the United States. Soon, they will be manufactured in China.

Since the debut of the original vertical chicken roaster, other models have been added specifically for turkeys, Cornish game hens and quail. They differ in size and in the number of vertical wires: from 10 wires for the turkey roaster



PATRICK TEHAN — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Above: Denis Spanek proves a carrot can carve a vertically roasted fowl. Below: Like poultry, vertical roasters come in several sizes.



to four wires for the quail, to hold each bird snugly and securely. It takes about an hour to cook a four-pound chicken; and about 2 hours and 20 minutes for a 13- to 18-pound turkey.

As of early March, Spanek has cooked 27,750 birds this way. (Yes, he keeps count.)

When he invited me to his home then for a demonstration, I walked in to find turkeys on the grill, chickens in the oven and Cornish game hens on the counter — all standing at attention, the Spanek way.

The roasted chickens were indeed succulent. So was the one I later cooked in my own oven perched atop the Spanek Vertical Roaster. The true rev-

elation, though, was vertical turkey. It was the juiciest turkey I'd ever tasted that hadn't been brined beforehand.

Spanek touts that the secret is the vertical rods that "sear the natural juices inside the bird."

Not exactly, counters food scientist Harold McGee of Palo Alto, who wrote the seminal "On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen" (Scribner). Although "searing in the juices" is a favorite catch-phrase of cooks of all walks, McGee says the crust that forms around the surface of meat as it cooks is not waterproof. However, searing does caramelize the meat surface to create deeper flavor.

Instead, McGee offers another explanation for why the vertically cooked poultry is so moist.

"So much depends on heat transfer into the food. That's what really determines how juicy a piece of meat will be," says McGee, who has tried the Spanek Vertical Roaster. "The rods in the cavity probably help speed the cooking, so the bird will cook more quickly and be less likely to overcook. Also, because of the position of the bird, all parts of it are exposed more evenly to the oven's heat, rather than parts of it being blocked by the pan."

During its heyday in the 1990s, the vertical roasters generated \$5 million to \$10 million in revenues annually, Spanek says. That dropped significantly, though, when Spanek was badly hurt in a car collision in 2000. Driving home one day, his car was hit in the middle of an intersection. He suffered back and knee injuries that required several operations.

Until late last year, the former full-speed-ahead entrepreneur found himself mostly flat on his back, recuperating. With his brother long retired, and Spanek's three grown children busy with their own lives, he feared the vertical roaster business might go under. And he grew deeply depressed.

## Pep talk

It took his bones healing and a pep talk from his buddy DeLuise to get both his body and spirits vertical again.

"Dom told me, 'You've got one of the greatest products ever. God bless Mom, she's with you,'" Spanek recalls.

DeLuise added, Spanek says with a chuckle, "And don't worry if they have to take one of your legs. We'll get you a part in one of those pirate movies. They're looking to fill those roles."

Back on both feet now, Spanek is hard at work on new models of the roasters in bold, Le Creuset-like colors of red, blue and orange. Additionally, he has been scouting locations to open what he hopes will be a chain of Bistro Spanek Bistros — intimate cafes for eat-in or take-out organic salads and vertical roasted chicken.

He's also back to belowing his trademark, "We're off to verticalize the world."

And with gusto once again, he means it.

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Spanek vertical poultry roasters come in different sizes to cook different types of poultry. The cooking method for each of them is similar; the cooking times will vary.

## Basic Spanek vertical roasted chicken

Non-stick cooking spray	Salt and pepper
1 whole chicken (2 to 6 pounds), rinsed and patted dry	Broth, wine, beer or fruit juice

**Oven method:** Preheat oven to 450 degrees.

Lightly coat Spanek vertical chicken roaster with non-stick spray. Salt and pepper the chicken inside and out.

Holding chicken vertical and upright, place it on top of the vertical roaster and firmly press down on it so the top ring comes through neck cavity.

Place chicken vertically upright in a roasting pan large enough so there is about 2 inches of clearance between the pan and the chicken. (A single chicken will fit nicely into a 9-inch square or round roasting pan.)

Add your liquid of choice to the pan until it reaches a depth of at least 1/4 inch. You want to maintain at least 1/4 inch of liquid in the pan as the chicken cooks, so you may have to add more during the cooking process. This will help eliminate splattering in the oven.

Place pan in oven. Cook for 15 minutes at 450 degrees; then decrease temperature to 350 degrees and continue to cook for an additional 13 minutes per pound. (Note: For extra crisp skin, increase heat to 450 degrees again during final 5-10 minutes of the cooking time.)

For a 4-pound chicken, the total cooking time will be 15 minutes at 450 degrees, then about 52 minutes at 350 degrees.

**Charcoal grill method:** Follow same directions for preparing the chicken on the vertical roaster, placing roaster in a pan with liquid. Always use a tin or pan under the roaster when using a charcoal grill. Wrapping the pan in foil makes for easy clean-up, too.

Remove cooking rack from grill. Make a new platform using two or three clay bricks or a 1 1/2-inch thick unglazed clay Spanish floor tile placed on bottom of grill. Put briquettes around bricks (or tile). You'll need 40-50 briquettes to cook a chicken or turkey. Then put pan with poultry down on top of the platform. Put lid on grill, with vents open half way.

**Gas grill method:** Follow same directions for preparing the chicken on the vertical roaster in the pan with liquid. Remove cooking rack. If your grill has flavor rods, place a 12-inch square, 1 1/2-inch thick unglazed clay Spanish floor tile on top of flavor rods. If your grill has pumice rocks, push them aside, set in the tile, and surround the tile with the rocks. Place pan with chicken on top of the tile. Cover top of bird with foil. Poke a hole in the top of the foil where the top ring of the roaster is to allow venting.

If you go to [www.spanek.com](http://www.spanek.com), click on "Vertical Products," then click on "Downloadable Mini-Movies Demo," you'll find video clips to show you how to set up your grill perfectly.

**To serve:** Remove pan of chicken from oven. Let rest 7-10 minutes. Slide fork under top ring of vertical roaster and transfer both rack and poultry to serving platter to carve vertically. The chicken should be very tender and easy for your knife to cut through. Carve thighs first by slicing or pushing them off the carcass. Then make a V-cut and remove wishbone. Then peel down the breast.

From Denis Spanek

## Flavor variations for basic Spanek vertical roasted chicken

Once you position the chicken on the vertical roaster, it can be further seasoned by adding other flavorings underneath the skin on the breast. You can even season one side differently than the other for two taste treats.

Beginning at the neck of the mounted chicken, gently separate the skin from the meat with your fingertips down to the thigh and over the breast. Slide flavoring ingredients down and massage the outer skin. Cook as usual.

**For poulet bleu:** This version of the vertical roasted chicken was served at the Connaught Hotel in London.

Combine 3 ounces crumbled bleu cheese with 2 minced garlic cloves,

some finely diced shitake mushrooms and some chopped chives. Slide under the breast skin. The cheese will melt into a wonderful creaminess.

**For an Italian treat:** Use pesto sauce underneath the skin.

**For Latin flair:** Use a little salsa (with or without a dash of tequila) underneath the skin.

**For a taste of Asia:** Mix 1 tablespoon peanut butter with a dash of soy sauce. Or mix 1/4 cup of teriyaki sauce with 2-3 peeled, seeded, diced oranges and some grated fresh ginger. Place underneath skin.

Source: Denis Spanek

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