

Brenn DeBlieck, owner/operator of the State Street Cafe in downtown Geneseo, has a "master's degree in cooking." His education is not from a culinary or chefs' school, but from years of experience.

Mr. DeBlieck has used that experience to create a unique menu at State Street Cafe, 23 S. State St.

"If I have any specialty, it is Mediterranean (Greek, Italian, Middle Eastern) food with a definite Midwest influence," he said. "I also take great pride in my soup. When I worked at Union Square Cafe in New York City, I was responsible for the soup of the day. That's where I learned how to build the flavors of a good soup."

State Street Cafe is open from 6:30 a.m. to 2 p.m. Tuesdays through Sundays, and from 4 to 7 p.m. Fridays, offering both a lunch and dinner menu.

"I come up with new Friday-night specials every week," Mr. DeBlieck said, listing examples of a recent Friday night's selections, including shrimp scampi sauteed with white wine, garlic and tomatoes and served with rice pilaf; lamb stew made with lamb, carrots, onions and mushrooms and served with pan-fried potatoes; and chicken parmesan lightly beaded with parmesan bread crumbs and topped with house-made marinara and mozzarella cheese, served with rice pilaf and sauteed spinach.

The lunch menu also is available on Friday nights. State Street Cafe also offers a full breakfast and lunch menu with daily specials.

Mr. DeBlieck's family hails from Geneseo and although he was born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, his family returned to Geneseo in time for him to start kindergarten.

"So I feel like I was born and raised here," he said. After graduating from the former J.D. Darnall High School (now Geneseo High School) in 1987, he spent a decade in Iowa City, attending the University of Iowa.

"As for my culinary background, my first job was when I was 15 and worked as a dietary aide in the kitchen at Hammond-Henry Hospital," he said.

In Iowa City, he got a college education in the classroom and at various restaurants, including The Brown Bottle and Mondo's.

Then he was off to New York City, where he worked at a Greek restaurant, Niko's, on the upper West Side. He also was the executive chef of Gator's Southern Seafood in the South Street Seaport, which he described as "a tourist area in southern Manhattan very close to the World Trade Center.

"After 9/11, I worked for Union Square Cafe, which is one of the most prestigious restaurants in New York City," he said. "At the time, it held the highest overall Zagat (a restaurant rating publication) in the city."

From there, Mr. DeBlieck moved to Providence, R.I., and he served as the executive chef at the Country Club of New Bedford, located in Dartmouth, Mass., for five years.

"So, to answer your question 'Have I always been a chef?,' the answer is I did not start out trying to be one, but once it got into my blood, it was there to stay," he said. "I never attended culinary school, but worked for some very high-end chefs in New York. ... I view it as my 'master's degree in cooking.' "

During his time on the East Coast, he met and married his wife, Juliana. They have two daughters, Eleanor, a first-grader at Millikin School, and Sally, who will begin kindergarten in the fall.

"One of the reasons we decided to move back is to take advantage of Geneseo's excellent schools," Mr. DeBlieck said. "The best thing about being back in Geneseo is the relaxed pace of life compared to that of the East Coast. ... going to Tuesday-night ice-cream socials in the park, and reconnecting with my country roots and giving my family those same roots."

He said he hopes to see State Street Cafe become known as a "Geneseo" place to get well-prepared food for a reasonable price "so that it stays full all the time. I want to be a part of Geneseo community folklore as the best place to get good soup and good food and homemade baked goods, and the place with a welcoming atmosphere."

He also said he wants people to know that he and his staff can cater almost any event -- both at the cafe and off site. The cafe also is available for private parties. For more information, call State Street Cafe at 309-489-0100.