The Boston Globe

At Home with
Jamie and Monica Mammano

'No, I didn't hire her . . . But I would have.'

JAMIE MAMMANO, OWNER OF MISTRAL, OF WIFE MONICA, FORMER MISTRAL HOSTESS

By Bella English
GLOBE STAFF

It has been a big year for Jamie and Monica Mammano. Last April, he proposed. In July, they married in Mexico, where she's from. He returned to his Boston restaurant, Mistral, and she took a job with the hot new South End bakery, Flour. Last week, they moved into a new condo on Columbus Avenue.

They had met when Monica Barba, who came to Boston to study English, took a part-time job as a hostess at Mistral in September 1999. ("No, I didn't hire her," says her husband. "But I would have.") A romance followed, and in December, Monica's traditional family ordered her back to Mexico. "My parents didn't want me to be here with my boyfriend," she says.

There commenced a long-distance commute between Boston and Tijuana, where her parents approved of Mammano. The rest is history.

The two snuggle and nuzzle like the newlyweds they are. In conversation, they switch easily from English to Spanish and back. Though Mammano, 41, claims he failed Spanish three times in high school, he's fluent now, thanks to Monica — and to a yearlong gig as chef for the US ambassador to Spain in 1983.

Naturally, both like to cook — Monica, traditional Mexican dishes such as chicken in chile guajillo. Her favorite home dish for him to cook is grilled steak with his mother's barbecue sauce. On worknights, they eat a late dinner together; often, it's takeout from Mistral. On Sundays, his weekend day off, they often entertain. Their living space is compact, with a galley-type kitchen and no dining room, so it's buffet-style, with guests grabbing a seat wherever they can find one.

The couple doesn't get many offers of home-cooked meals themselves; people are too intimidated to feed him. "I'll eat anything," protests Mammano. "There's nothing I won't eat."

Until he met Monica, Mammano had never set foot in Mexico. Now, he adores it, and its influences can be seen in the couple's condo — pottery, platters, paintings, bowls full of peppers — and even in Mistral's kitchen, where Mammano has tried a calamari dish made with Monica's mom's salsa.

On their off-hours, the couple likes to sleep in. They love to travel and collect art, from folk to modern. An especially prized piece is a bride and groom sculpture that Monica's aunt made from a bread dough popular in Mexican folk art. Its detail work, down to the smallest petals of flowers, the lace on the bride's underwear, is precise and beautiful.

Both also like to read (he prefers nonfiction, she Spanish fiction) and are inveterate shoppers. "He's the worst," says Monica, 27. "I have to drag him out of the shops." What's his weakness? "Shoes, shoes, and shoes," she says.

Their guilty pleasures? Golf in season for him; a Spanish soap opera, "My Destiny is You," for her, At mention of this, Jamie rolls his eyes. "It's no worse than golf on TV," she reminds him. They both laugh.

Since it opened in 1997, Mistral has received a slew of accolades and been named one of the top 25 new restaurants in America by Esquire magazine.

So what does a top chef keep in his own refrigerator? In this case, lots of cheese, a couple of eggplants, some champagne, a can of Coke — and Prego tomato sauce.

Supermarket tomato sauce?

"It's for when we make chicken parmesan," he says.

On the counter is a platter of pastries from Flour, where Monica manages the front of the store. They both admit to a sweet tooth.

Their next order of business is to start a family. As soon as possible. "She wants four kids," says Mammano. They nuzzle, and start speaking in Spanish, again.