Port Washington resident Bill Moren started cooking the way most men do — grilling food.

He and his wife Pat had a small hibachi grill they set on the deck of their Chicago apartment.

Bill Moren has plans for the freshly picked pears and heirloom tomatoes on his kitchen counter.

But when Moren moved to Denver and a physical exam showed the 30-year-old financial manager had high cholesterol and triglycerides, his physician sent him to a dietician.

“That was before people were so concerned about cholesterol,” Moren said. “She wanted to know what I ate the day before. I had an Italian sausage sandwich.

“It wasn’t so much a diet (she suggested) as a way of living — eat more fresh or frozen fruits and vegetables, stay way from all canned and prepared foods because they have a lot of salt and other ingredients, and have some meals without meat.

“Eight weeks later, I had lost weight and my blood tests were fine.”

The dietician suggested Moren learn to cook, beginning with making bread. The breadmaking experience led him to experiment with other foods and take classes.

“I started to get into cooking. It was a relaxing, creative thing, and I started to do the majority of the cooking,” Moren said.

“I wasn’t traveling, so we would have meals around the table together. I don’t do much baking because baking is more of a science and you have to follow recipes. With other things, I’ll look at a recipe and may make changes, sometimes because of available ingredients. Most of the time, I just cook.”

When company is invited for dinner, Moren usually tries new dishes.

“It’s always a great challenge when you have people coming for dinner and you’ve never done any of these things,” he said. “I have a couple of standbys, but it’s not nearly as interesting as making something new.”

Moren’s passion for innovative cooking has resulted in him taking classes around the world. He learned to make sauces, breads, fish and Spanish tapas that way.

“There is something appealing about going to Tuscany and spending a day learning to cook Italian food with local wine,” said Moren, who with his wife went on two restaurant tours of Italy with Marcel Biro, former owner of Biro restaurant in Sheboygan.

He also took 15 hands-on cooking classes from Biro at his restaurant.

Moren and his wife recently went on a culinary walking tour of Portland, Ore., and met the various chefs. They always seek out restaurants that specialize in local cuisine and may buy spices and other ingredients not readily found here.

When they were in Oregon, the couple also took in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, a special treat for Pat, who was a professional actress in Chicago.

They stayed with friends, and Moren prepared pizzas on the grill for them.

“Whenever I stay with people, I end up cooking a meal,” he said.

Even a recent week in South Haven, Mich., with their daughter, son-in-law and two granddaughters turned into a culinary challenge for Moren to prepare foods the children — one of whom is allergic to dairy, eggs, soy protein and nuts — would eat.

“One won’t eat vegetables so I would puree roasted beets and carrots and add them to spaghetti sauce. If she saw one speck of a vegetable, she wouldn’t eat it,” Moren said.

As soon as her husband started cooking, Pat willingly took off her apron and handed him the spoon.

“I can’t cook,” she said. “I’m a pretty good chopper, a really good scouring maid and I can poach eggs.”

“She knows more than she admits,” Moren said, noting his wife usually attends cooking classes with him.

One year Pat, their daughter and Pat's sister had to step in and finish the Thanksgiving meal Moren had started the day before. Moren, who has been making Thanksgiving dinner for Pat's family for years, woke up ill and unable to get out of bed.

He told the women how to prepare side dishes and roast the turkey that was sitting in a brine mixture in the refrigerator.

"I always brine poultry and roasts," Moren said. Sometimes he heavily salts the meat and lets it sit covered in the refrigerator overnight. Other times, he uses a water-and-salt brine to tenderize the meat and seal in flavors.

"I've done it both ways and it doesn't seem to make much difference. Brining makes a juicier, more flavorful turkey," he said. "Salt is one of the basic taste senses and a conveyor of flavors."

Moren has six kinds of finishing salt in his cabinet, including pink flake salt from Australia.

He prefers cooking locally grown, seasonal foods, so apples, pears, squash, tomatoes and peppers figure prominently in his cuisine now.

He tends three plots at the Feith Family Ozaukee YMCA's community garden — one for himself, where he grew nine kinds of peppers and six varieties of tomatoes this year, and two for the Food Pantry in Port. He also grows herbs and heirloom tomatoes in pots on his deck and patio and shops at farmers markets.

Moren, who is chairman of the Saukville YMCA's board of managers and is on regional and state YMCA committees, was instrumental in getting the first community garden in Ozaukee County started.

"This is the second year and we doubled in size and have a waiting list," said Moren who is almost as passionate about the Y as he is about cooking. He enjoys combining both interests.

On Thursday, Sept. 29, he will prepare the main entree — butternut squash lasagna with beet greens and rainbow chard — for a five-course harvest dinner hosted by the YMCA and Baltica Tea Room and Gift Shop in downtown Port.

Volunteers are preparing the food. Proceeds will go to the Food Pantry.

Moren fell in love with Port Washington when he moved from Des Moines, Iowa, in 2004.

"We started in Chicago, went to Denver for 18 years, then Des Moines for 15 years and then to Port," Moren said. "We've been downsizing all our lives."

On a recent morning, Moren's kitchen counter had a carton of pears his neighbor Vernetta Tackes brought him and baskets of heirloom tomatoes he was taking to a friend who planned to make tomato-basil soup.

He made several batches of caramel-pear butter and a pear tart for Tackes to thank her for the fruit.