

THE STORY OF CAPS

by Elaine Karadais

Caps Oak Street Bar & Grill is a longtime favorite meeting place for East County residents. The story behind the restaurant — and the couple who own it — reveals where the quality of their establishment comes from.

I married a man who is consumed by the art of food service. I joined him in the restaurant business with no previous food-related experience of my own — in spite of the fact that my parents spent their lives in the food and alcohol industry. Bill really needed me, however, because I was always good at organizing projects, bringing people and resources together, and managing schedules. A great deal of the business of running a restaurant doesn't concern preparing and serving food, and I really was able to manage the business part of Bill's restaurant businesses.

My Story

At one time or another my parents owned grocery stores, bars, and a coffee shop. I was their final child born eight years after my folks thought they were done with

babies; my siblings were assisting in the family businesses while I was still sucking my thumb sitting in my little chair that was probably perched on top of a pinball machine or a counter.

Before I was ten, my siblings were married and by the time I reached my teen years the pace of my parents' lives had slowed, and my dad owned a single bar. There was no place in Lou's Happy Club for a 15-year-old girl, or even for my mom, because the bar was located right in the middle of San Francisco's seedy Mission District.

My father was a good human being. He was a very loving person and one of the most unflappable people I ever knew. When my dad was upset the only indication he would give was either to scratch his head or reach for his Roloids.

My father was pureblood Hispanic, but Mom was a first generation descendent of Greek immigrants. Ours would normally have been a culturally blended family, but Mom was as assertive as Dad was laid back so we grew up Greek and were raised in the vibrant traditions of the Greek Orthodox Church. Mom dragged us to Sunday School every Sunday. Our entire lifestyle had Grecian qualities. We were living the culture shown in the movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*. Every part of the movie was true. For example, my sisters and I all married men of Greek descent; the women in our church struggled with mustaches. I could go on....

Dad attended church only on Good Friday — more because he feared his mother than because he feared God. My grandmother had ten children. She died

when I was young, but I can remember her as a very small lady, sitting on a couch with her hands folded across her chest, and never saying a word. She was obviously a strong person, since my father was still afraid to miss Good Friday services years after his mother had departed the earth.

Remarkably, I sometimes find myself sitting quietly with my hands folded across my chest in what I guess is a subconscious imitation of that dimly remembered lady.

I attended Catholic School in grades one through eight. The high quality of the education I received there provided the best possible foundation for my life. By comparison I found my subsequent studies in public high school to be dry and uninspiring.

Following my senior year I gave myself a graduation gift — ten days in beautiful Hawaii. The evening before I left, my family took me out for a night on the town in a Greek nightclub to celebrate the trip because up to that point nobody in my family had ever spent even an hour in Hawaii. Counting siblings and spouses there must have been 20 of us.

By a simple twist of fate the man who was to become my husband, was also there for a night on the town with his buddies. I was 18; he was 20.

Bill's Story

Bill Karadais was born and raised in a small town in Northern Greece called Orestias. "Bill" is actually a transliteration of his baptism name "Vasilios" and a lot easier to say. So he's been Bill all his life.



Bill learned much about cooking at his father's Taverna, which is a small Greek restaurant — like one of our full-service coffee shops. His family was poor and they wanted Bill to find a better life somewhere else so he joined the Merchant Marines when he was only 14 years old. With his background, he was put to work on those ships in the galleys, preparing meals and learning the tricks of the food service trade.

Bill jumped ship in California and began working for a number of San Francisco's fashionable restaurants. The owner of Orsi's Restaurant — a famous Italian eatery in those days — took him under his wing and taught him a lot of trade secrets and inside tricks of the master chefs. He was working at Orsi's on the fateful night when he happened to show up at that Greek nightclub on the very evening that I was there celebrating with my family.

I was flustered and pleased when Bill came to my table and, right there in front of all my family, asked me to dance. I learned later that the invitation was the result of a bet between Bill and his friends. They put a bottle of liquor on the issue because the friends really believed that I wouldn't accept his invitation. "No way will she dance with you," they told him. When he won that bet that night, Bill Karadais won a lot more than that bottle of Ouzo.

The fact is, Bill almost lost that bet because, even though my first impression was that he was really good looking, I hesitated to dance with him because he was wearing white socks. My sister Dorothy told me, "Go ahead and dance with him. You can always change the socks."

After the dance I gave him my phone number and the next morning left for Hawaii. But every day I would call home asking if Bill had called. And every day they said that he hadn't.

When I came back he still hadn't called so I went to his restaurant and located him. He was surprised and pleased to see me. People find it difficult to believe today, but Bill was shy in those days and



required a jump-start to get moving down the road of romance. We dated for the next five years, then he popped the question, and we got married in a Reno wedding chapel.

For the sake of the two mothers, a few months after the Reno nuptials we officially redid the service in the church, I never liked to be the center of attention, so we conducted a Medium-Size Reduced Calorie Greek wedding. We brought his mom from Greece for the event. I never had a moment's problem with my mother-in-law. The two mothers at the wedding loved each other right away.

Minding Our Business

Bill and I had three kids by the time we had been married five years. I was a stay-at-home mom; Bill and my dad joined forces to buy a Polynesian Bar in San Francisco called Trad'r Sam that is still located on Geary Boulevard in the Avenues by the beach.

Seven years later we opened a Polynesian Restaurant in San Jose with the same Trad'r Sam name. Before that I never knew that Bill could cook. I had always done the family cooking, and the man absolutely shocked me with the recipes that he had stored in his brain and the sophisticated and amazing techniques

for food preparation that he seemed to pull out of his hat. They say that everyone is good at something and after a decade of being married to him I finally discovered that my man is a gifted chef.

We were gluttons for punishment because five years after the Trad'r Sam Restaurant, we opened a second restaurant in the City called Spartacus, which, as you might imagine, offered pure Greek cuisine. After all, Bill is Greek and that was the kind of cooking he grew up with.

A few years later we were burned out, so in 1989 we shut down both restaurants and moved into a slower lifestyle in East County. We purchased a house in Antioch off of Contra Loma in a new subdivision called Centennial Park. I got my real estate license and began a specialty business selling bars and restaurants; Bill got a job tending bar at the Discovery Bay Country Club.

The Birth of Cap's

One day, in 1995, Bill ran into a man named Steve Capozzo, whom everyone called Caps. He was planning to convert the old Masonic Lodge in Brentwood — that had been built in 1926 — into an upscale restaurant.

Life works out in mysterious ways sometimes because Bill and Capozzo

just happened to run into each other in a DUI class they were taking together. Caps was bragging about how he was going to build a restaurant and then all he would have to do was come in every day, count the money he had earned that day, and take it home.

In what turned out to be a true prophecy, Bill said to him, "If you think that's all there is to running a restaurant, I'll see you in two years and then I'll own it." Bill had overestimated Capozzo's ability to keep the thing running by a little bit because it was actually only 18 months later that he called Bill and said, "Come help me! I really need help!"

That was July 1997. We took a look at the place, recognized the potential, and a few months later we were the owners of Cap's Oak Street Bar & Grill. After all the troubles we had gone through with the restaurant business... Now here we were jumping right back into the water! But a dozen years later we're still swimming.

We're having fun with Caps! I never wake up in the morning wishing I didn't have to go to work. I enjoy interfacing with people; making them happy. My gift is for making things happen —

whether for a wedding or a funeral. I call us oil changers because, for example, on a single day a month ago we set our meeting room up for a birthday party in the afternoon, a funeral party in the early evening, followed by a late-night comedy club. We pulled all those changes off without a hitch.

In his grumbling way Bill is having a good time too. He loves to hear people rave about his food; it makes him happy to make customers happy. We've gotten to this point because we are both serious about any complaint; we sometimes carry it with us for days. An important part of our success is due to our marvelous crew. Our people don't leave; they know what they are doing. They are family!

We're not making any plans for the future beyond simply doing what we're doing. Bill sometimes talks about retirement but it's not going to happen. I won't let it happen because I don't want to stop giving. I don't want to stay home and watch daytime TV. I have too much to offer; so does Bill.

And anyway, there's nothing we could do in retirement that would be more

satisfying than what we're doing now, so we might as well keep doing it.

ELAINE KARADAIS

AGE:
55

OCCUPATION:
RESTAURATEUR ("OIL
CHANGER")

PLACE OF BIRTH:
SAN FRANCISCO

LOCAL RESIDENCE:
OAKLEY

LIFE GOAL:
TO CONTINUE DOING
JUST WHAT I'M DOING

For more information, go to www.capsrestaurant.com, call 925-634-1025, or visit the restaurant at 144 Oak Street, Brentwood.

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