

FEAST *of*

LOVE

By JOHANNA CROSBY

Blending ingredients for success

Tom Stahle and Mary Phelps are up every morning by 3:30, and arrive at their tiny natural foods take-out café, Earthly Delights in Osterville, by 5.

Phelps starts the coffee and begins baking muffins in the cubicle-sized kitchen, and Stahle mans the cash register and takes orders. Their workday wraps up 11 hours later. They head home and are in bed by 8 every night so they can start the cycle again the next day.

They haven't had a vacation since they opened in 2000.

Running a restaurant as a couple may seem like a "romantic notion," says Tom Fazio, chef and co-owner of Fazio's Trattoria in Hyannis. "But the business is a mistress. You can't get away from it."

Well-known as a high-stress industry, the restaurant business is typically fraught with long hours, the pressure to turn out quality food to order and satisfy the demands and whims of customers. For couples who live and work together, especially in the restaurant industry, challenges come built-in to the business.

"You are never really sure when you are off the clock," says Barbara Maurer, a licensed marriage and family therapist in Osterville. "The restaurant can take over your whole life. You may forget to make time to enjoy the private side of (the) marriage."

Instead of seeing their spouse as a source of relaxation and intimacy, both partners may feel from time to time that the other is a source of added stress, Maurer says. "You may want to distance yourself when you

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BARBARA MAURER
MARRIAGE AND FAMILY THERAPIST

in Cape couples' restaurants

aren't working, which can create more stress on the marriage."

The couples who are the most successful at combining their job and relationship have created a sense of structure in their private and work lives, Maurer says. They carve out down-time, like traveling in the off-season, to take a break from the business.

On the flip side, there are many joys to working with your life partner. A successful restaurant and partnership can reflect a couple's identity in the community, Maurer says, "which can be very gratifying."

Four restaurateur couples on the Cape have found their own recipes for successfully blending their passion for food and each other.

Tom and Eileen Fazio seem to have achieved the perfect yin and yang.

"We have a strange com-

bination, but we complement each other," says Tom, 51, who grew up in New Jersey and is of Italian descent. Eileen, 49, a native of Albany, N.Y., has Irish roots.

"My wife is much better working with the public than I am. She has more of a gentle touch," Tom says. "I'm in the kitchen. Everything in my world is hot and sharp. But I've mellowed." What makes their partnership work, he says, "is that Eileen supports my passion and my dream."

"We have the same vision," Eileen chimes in.

That vision is to serve their customers authentic Italian food featuring fresh homemade pastas, bread, soups and prime cuts of meats. Everything on their menu, which is a collaborative effort, is made from scratch or to order.

Tom started working in a restaurant owned by fam-



Husband-and-wife team Tom and Eileen Fazio play to each other's strengths in dividing the workload at their restaurant, Fazio's Trattoria on Main Street in Hyannis. Christine Hochkeppel/Cape Cod Media Group

ily friends in New Jersey when he was 13. He and Eileen met in San Francisco in the '80s, when he was working for restaurants in North Beach. They married in 1987 and moved back East to be near family. They bought Val Montilios Bakery on Main Street, Hyannis, 21 years ago, considering it an ideal setting for their trattoria-style restaurant. Tom uses Montilio's large oven in a corner of the rectangular kitchen to bake his rustic loaves of bread.

They've divided their workload into clearly defined roles. Eileen runs the front of the house, a job which includes serving as hostess and bartender, doing prep work, keeping track of inventory and overseeing the wait staff.

"I stay out of the kitchen," she says with a laugh.

Tom runs the line in the kitchen. In the summer he hires additional help, but in the off-season it's a one-man operation.

They typically put in 14-hour days. Tom shows up at 7 a.m. to start baking bread and making homemade pasta. Eileen arrives around 9 or 10 to make the desserts, prepare the salad dressings and order the wine.

"It's like running a household," Eileen says. "We are doing it together."

But, they acknowledge, there are personal sacrifices and trade-offs attached to running



Tobin Wirt, left, and Bob King talk about owning Café Chew and how it works for them as a couple. When they worked in different fields, they "were like two ships passing in the night."

Photo by Merrily Cassidy/Cape Cod Media Group

a successful restaurant together.

"Our home life doesn't take place at home," Eileen says. "It takes place here."

But the upside, Tom adds, "is we get to spend the whole day together."

Their children, Hannah, 21, and Sonny, 18, grew up in the restaurant. When they were young they used to do their homework

at the counter. As they got older, they bussed and waited tables. Over the years the family celebrated their birthday parties at the restaurant instead of at their Marstons Mills home.

"There is so much time spent away from your loved ones," Tom says. "Yet if one of us had to stay home at night, it would be like punishment. Every night is opening night.



Of all the soups at Café Chew in Sandwich, "this is by far the one that is both the most requested, as well as the easiest to make," says co-owner Bob King. "We use day-old brioche bread and croissants to make 'ginger-cinnamon-scented croutons' to serve with the soup.

"People love it. The comment we most frequently get about this soup is that people like it so much because 'it doesn't taste like a pumpkin pie.'"

Butternut bisque and ginger-cinnamon croutons
From Café Chew, Sandwich
2-3 packages of pre-peeled butternut

SOUP'S ON!

squash (or knock yourself out and buy whole, peel it, and de-seed)

- 1 stick butter
- 1 cup brown sugar
- 1 tablespoon kosher salt

Submerge squash in a pot of water and boil until very soft.

Strain squash and put mixture into a mixer or food processor with a stick of butter (You may have to do this step in several batches.).

After squash is pureed, place back in the pan you boiled it in.

Add about a cup of brown sugar and a tablespoon of kosher salt. Place pot on

the stove over medium low heat, and begin adding light cream, until soup is the consistency you desire.

Taste and adjust with more brown sugar and salt, if necessary.

Ginger-cinnamon-scented croutons

Use brioche bread and day-old croissants for these. Cut bread and or croissants into small squares and toss with some melted butter, until moist. Sprinkle with ground ginger powder, cinnamon and some brown sugar to taste. Place croutons in a single layer on a sheet pan and bake in a 350 degree oven, checking on them and turning, or "fluffing," them about every 10 minutes, until fully browned.

"It's a passion that is in your blood. You have to be driven to do it," he says. "If I don't get up in the morning and make bread, I feel empty."

The Fazios take Sunday morning off and enjoy brunch with their family at home. They also take a break in the winter, closing the restaurant for a week and heading to Naples, Fla., to play.

For Alan and Gretchen Champney, running an upscale restaurant means they literally can't get away from work. They live in an apartment above their restaurant, L'Alouette Bistro, on Route 28 in Harwich Port.

And, Alan says, "it's a good fit for us."

A native Cape Codder, Alan, 51, started washing dishes in restaurants when he was 12 and worked his way up, serving in various positions in the business. He and Gretchen met in the summer of 1991, when both of them were waiting tables at an Orleans restaurant. Their engagement took place at L'Alouette, and they wed in 1994. Both always dreamed of owning a restaurant.

The couple bought L'Alouette in 2004, revamped the menu – which features contemporary French cuisine – and changed the décor of the two intimate dining rooms. They cater to high-end customers.

"We're very hands-on owners; we do what needs to be done," says Alan, who has pitched in to do the dishes some nights, while Gretchen often waits tables.

He manages the front of the house, including the staff and wine list, while Gretchen, a self-taught pastry chef, makes the desserts before 10 a.m. They collaborate on the menu, and both share hosting duties during dinner. Their workday usually wraps up by 10 or 11 p.m. as the last customers leave.

"We have done it for so long it seems like a natural thing for us," Alan says. "We came into this business with our eyes wide open ... There are moments of high pressure and stress when you have tons of customers. It's a lot of hard work. But this is a fun business when you get it right. And we have it right."

"It's gratifying," Gretchen says, "to have built a successful business together and to hear positive feedback from customers."



Alan and Gretchen Champney run L'Alouette Bistro in Harwich. Their engagement took place at the restaurant, which they bought about a decade later. Photo by Merrily Cassidy/Cape Cod Media Group

"It's a lot of hard work. But this is a fun business when you get it right. And we have it right."

ALAN CHAMPNEY

Neither can imagine being married to someone who is outside the business. of the joys is we get to spend a lot of time together."

"The hours are so strange," Alan says. The Champneys, who have no children, "You'd be away from home all the time. One do make time for their personal life. They

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take Sundays off, and during the summer they often head for a day at the Outer Beach.

"It either strengthens your relationship or highlights the weaknesses," Alan says of working together. "If you don't have a strong marriage, you are more vulnerable if you put this stress on it."

It helps that they are opposites in temperament. Alan admits to having a "more forceful personality, while Gretchen is more reserved.

"She definitely brings a softer side" to the business, he says, while he has the ability to make decisions faster.

And if the occasional disagreement arises: "Both of us can let things go," Gretchen adds.

Agreement about the importance of organic food is one of the bonds that brings Tom Stahle and Mary Phelps closer together. Specializing in made-to-order sandwiches and dishes made from fresh organic ingredients, they have been together 16 years and take pride in the fact that they "walk the talk" at their café, as well as in every part of their lifestyle, Tom says. They tend a large backyard organic vegetable garden at their Marston's Mills home and try to maintain a wardrobe consisting of organic clothing, made with natural fibers.

Both have been in the restaurant business since they were teenagers. Stahle, a native of Western Pennsylvania, started cooking at a country club when he was 13 and evolved into a self-taught chef. Phelps, who comes from Schenectady, N.Y., majored in restaurant and hotel management at Niagara University near Niagara Falls, N.Y. She began cooking when she was 6 and became interested in nutritional cooking. She opened a tiny eatery on St. John's and ran a natural foods café in Centerville.

Their business is a two-person operation to cut down on labor costs. Phelps, 43, does most of the home style cooking and develops the menu, while Stahle, 49, runs the front of the house. He describes her as a modern day Mary Brock, owner of the famed Alice's Restaurant. "She doesn't measure anything. She just makes it taste good," he says proudly.

The couple's humor and easygoing man-

ner with diners – also reminiscent of Alice's Restaurant – is reflected in signs posted on the café rafters: "Harassing the cook will definitely result in smaller portions."

"We try to make it light and fun," Stahle says.

Innovative culinary creations are the hallmark of Café Chew, "Sandwich's sandwichery," the third Cape restaurant Bob King and Tobin Wirt have run together.

"We work together and play together; it's an interesting salad," says Wirt, 55, who grew up on a farm in Iowa.

A couple since 1986, they were married in 2004. They opened their new eatery, which serves breakfast and lunch, in August of 2009. The first year they each worked nine to 10 hours a day. Now they take Mondays and Tuesdays off to spend together.

And they say, having a business partner who is a life partner has many advantages.

"You have to work hard, and you have nothing left over for anyone else," says King, 53. "You don't turn it off. Neither of us is being pressured by the spouse about why don't you spend more time with me?"

When Wirt was working in the cablevision field, King says, "we were like two ships passing in the night." They much prefer working together "because we enjoy each other's company," he adds.

The couple has defined separate roles that match their personalities and backgrounds. King, who worked in high-end restaurants on the South Shore, is the general manager and is in charge of the food, ordering and cooking, while Wirt handles expediting and customer service.

"People think you are going to share equally, but ultimately somebody has to make the call," says King, who admits to being a type A personality. "When we disagree, I have the last word."

"I'll give him that," says Wirt, smiling. "It's important to recognize each other's strengths and weaknesses. He's a control freak, and I'm more casual and relaxed."

It's a recipe that's worked for them for 24 years, and their greatest joy is creating a successful business together.

"It's our baby," Wirt says. ♦



Mary Phelps and Tom Stahle work in the tiny kitchen of their café, Earthly Delights in Osterville. The two-person operation allows the couple to collaborate on dishes made from organic ingredients, served in a light and fun atmosphere. Photo by Merrily Cassidy/Cape Cod Media Group



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