

When Harry met Sally ... and they opened a restaurant

Couples share the joys, "oh boys" of co-kitchen-habitation

Jennifer Nycz-Conner

Ah, Valentine's Day. It conjures up images of couples seated at beautiful, candlelit restaurant tabletops, gazing lovingly into one another's eyes, their hearts full as they prepare to fill their stomachs.

But what happens when the love of your life is also your business partner, and you're both in charge of making those meals for other couples? What's your Valentine's dinner date like then?

The movie "When Harry Met Sally" is peppered with poignant vignettes of couples telling the story of how they met, married and stayed in love. In light of the upcoming holiday, local couples who not only fell in love and married, but were also brave, or crazy, enough to open restaurants, share their meeting of the minds and eventually, menus.

Brian and Tracy

Tracy O'Grady and Brian Wolken took the plunge into marriage and business on exactly the same day. On Sept. 2, 2005, the couple closed the deal on their marriage and opened their Ballston restaurant, Willow.

Bob Kinkead, the owner of Kinkead's restaurant in D.C. and a mentor, walked O'Grady down the aisle in the restaurant at 5 p.m. She and Wolken said, "I do," cut the cake, then kicked off the opening celebration at 6:30.

The pair, both trained chefs, met while working at Kinkead's. Legend has it that their initial encounters were less than amorous.

"I was his boss," O'Grady says with a grin. "She loves to say that," Wolken says.

How did the rancor evolve into romance? Easy, they say. "We stopped working together."

Now they're working together again, but in a much different scenario. Willow is the creation of O'Grady and business partner Kate Jansen, the co-founder of Firehook Bakery.

Wolken, the director of operations, handles everything not on the plate and, by design, has no ownership stake. To preserve their partners' and investors' peace of mind, the couple decided not to have Wolken as an official owner.

The first year of marriage can always be a little rocky, as is the first year of owning a new restaurant, which often demands upward of 70 and 80 hour weeks.

Being both business and life partners isn't for the weak of heart or stomach, Wolken says.

"You have to be able to tell her that the soup isn't very good," he says, adding quickly that she makes really great soup.

So with two trained chefs in the family, who cooks at home? "We're never at home," they say in unison.

Anil and Shivani

Anil Miglani went into the store looking for starch. He left with his future wife.

Miglani, who is from India, was working as an architect in Connecticut when a quick errand introduced him to Shivani, who had recently arrived from India and was working in the store. The couple married in August 1991 and moved to the Washington area after Anil was laid off during a recession.

They set up house in Crofton, Md., and Anil worked in architecture while Shivani went to school to study business. She noticed a closed Subway franchise and investigated to see what would be needed to run it.

Just getting hold of the right Subway contacts proved a daunting task that might have discouraged many, "but she didn't quit," Anil says. Such tenacity would lead the pair to own five or six Subway stores by 2002. That, however, didn't quite satiate the entrepreneurial craving.

To their thinking, there weren't any good Indian restaurants in the Gaithersburg area where they lived, and they decided to do something about it. They found a space, Anil handled the interior build-out and Tandoori Nights was born.

That was four years ago this past November. Besides still owning one Subway store in Maryland and two Penang restaurants in D.C., which they purchased this past fall, the couple is opening a 6,000-square-foot Tandoori Nights in Clarendon later this month.

Division of labor keeps the partnership strong in the restaurant and beyond, with their respective roles of operations (Anil) and executive chef (Shivani).

"We don't interfere with each other," Anil says. "She works the back end, and I work the front end."

While the hours can be draining, Anil points out that most people spend eight or 10 hours at work, only to see their family just a few hours at the end of the day.

"We spend more time together" this way, he says.

Dean and Kay

The restaurant business isn't exactly known for being stress free. But for Dean Gold, it proved to be just what the doctor ordered.

Gold and his wife, Kay Zimmerman, opened Cleveland Park Italian eatery Dino in July of last year. The restaurant had been in the works for more than two years.

In 2002, Gold had a heart attack, followed by a quintuple bypass, at age 43. The surgery started him on the road to recovery, but his cardiologist was clear: The full journey would be up to Gold himself. And it could also be the best thing that ever happened to him.

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Gold, who had spent 10 years working for Whole Foods as a buyer, vice president of purchasing and assistant store manager, realized he had spent his happiest times professionally managing a restaurant in Southern California.

"We decided it was time to start looking into doing something that we really wanted to do," he says.

It took a long time to find the right space, but once they did, things took off. Many of the lessons Gold learned at Whole Foods apply to the restaurant business, in particular the zealous focus on the customer experience that makes a grocery store one worth lingering in.

"We try to be as fanatical as we can about that," he says, adding that his wife is "really fabulous" in that capacity.

Zimmerman works at the restaurant while also maintaining her full-time job as an international recruiter, "which is wonderful because she has an income," Gold jokes.

Zimmerman and Gold occasionally butt heads when it comes to the big picture, and there are times when the staff doesn't come near the office. However, they've learned to leave the office at the office, using the drive home to decompress and not letting business matters affect their lives outside the restaurant. "We've been very, very successful at that."

Ellen and Todd

Ellen Gray was a sales vendor with an industrial food service company when she walked into pitch Todd Gray, the sous chef at Galileo. He kept inviting her back, and, naively, Ellen admits later, she didn't realize he was more interested in her than her industrial products.

She eventually wised up and stated, "I don't date customers."

No problem, he replied. "I'm never going to buy anything."

Thirteen years later, this pair of native Washingtonians has been married for 11 years, are the proud parents of a 6-year-old son and the owners of Equinox.

It's truly a family affair, says Ellen, who was still seating people when nine months' pregnant.

Working in the business together is a key to understanding the crazy hours, stresses and schedules that a restaurant demands. Each knows what goes on after 10 p.m. every night, exactly where Table 41 is and all the personalities involved.

"It gives us a much greater common of understanding of each other's worlds," Ellen says.

She sees running a family business as a mission in an industry increasingly filled with big chains. There's not enough mom and pop shops these days, she says.

"Families always did work together," Ellen says. "It's a very traditional way of doing business that's becoming less and less. We're losing that sort of quality, and personality and individuality. It's an important aspect of our business culture that I hope never to see lost."

But with rising real estate prices, food costs, customers demanding more food for less money and the Wal-Mart-iza-

tion of the restaurant business, "it's becoming more difficult for the smaller ones to compete," she says. "It's a struggle, because we don't have the buying power."

There are also frightening moments. For starters, both spouses are tied to the business. If it closes, they're both out of jobs.

"That's scary," Ellen says. "It's not just one person going down. It's the whole ship."

But, they agree, the benefits far outweigh the downsides. The pride that comes from building a business, especially one that started a few blocks from the White House soon after Sept. 11 and has passed the five-year mark, is reward in and of itself.

"At the end of the day, even if we closed up shop tomorrow," Ellen says, "the thing that we're most proud of is that we did it."

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