

# WHARF DREAMS

## Stagnaro Bros. Restaurant and Seafood Enterprises Celebrates 80 Years on the Santa Cruz Waterfront

By Geoffrey Dunn

**I**t's a grey and stormy afternoon in mid-February, and I am seated in the cozy confines of Stagnaro Bros. Restaurant at the end of the Santa Cruz Wharf, enjoying a comforting bowl of New England clam chowder while engaged in conversation with Darlene Stagnaro Dyer, who serves as a daytime hostess at the family enterprise.

Outside, nature is commanding center stage. Huge winter waves are crashing along West Cliff Drive and also brushing up against the wharf. The vistas are absolutely spectacular. A large swell momentarily rocks the wharf—it feels like a moderate-size temblor—and Darlene and I look at each other, wait for the shaking to stop, then look at each other with a relaxed smile. We've been through this shaking before.

Darlene is the daughter of one of the late-Stagnaro patriarchs Ernesto ("Ernie") Stagnaro, who helped found the family enterprise eight decades ago with his older brother Giovanni ("John") and his mother, Te-

resa. Darlene has seen many changes on the wharf and waterfront over the years (not all necessarily to her liking), but she says, "I still love it down here. It feels like home to me."

One of the things she loves, she says, is that the wharf has its seasons. "Winter is quieter and the ocean more dramatic," she says. "The pace at work is a little slower. Sometimes you can go a little stir crazy in winter. But you see more locals than during the summer, when everything speeds up. Spring and fall have their own rhythms, too. I enjoy the cycle every year."

Darlene was raised on the wharf, spending days as a child in the family fish market, during the era when the wharf served as home to an extensive Italian fishing community. "I loved listening to all the old fishermen in the market and in the upstairs office," she recalls. "They were all so sweet and colorful. Santa Cruz was so small back then. You knew everybody."

**M**any seasons have passed since Darlene's childhood, and the Stagnaro Bros. open-air seafood market at the outer bend of the pier is the last of its kind on the Santa Cruz Wharf. Featuring a colorful assortment of fresh fish whenever maritime conditions make them available, the market provides a last vestige of the colorful ambience that once dominated the local waterfront.

First established 80 years ago by Darlene's late family members during the dark days of the Great Depression, the market has survived the transition of the wharf from a commercial fishing center to a visitor-oriented facility that now brings in millions of wayfarers annually.

(Top) With their boats as a backdrop, fisherman combined daily repairs with a chance to socialize. Davits were used to hoist their boats onto the wharf to protect them from rough seas.





(Above) The Stagnaro Bros. Restaurant as it appeared during the 1940s. (Right) Still thriving today, Stagnaro Bros. is a popular spot during the Woodies on the Wharf event that takes place each summer.

Today, Stagnaro Bros. family enterprise has expanded to include a two-story restaurant and bar on the wharf, and a large-scale wholesale fish enterprise on nearby Washington Street. "If you're looking for any type of fish," retired family member "Skip" Tara recently told me, "we can find it for you." The company has some 125 employees—including roughly a dozen Stagnaro family members from various generations—working full or part-time.

Most visitors to Santa Cruz are unaware of the once-thriving maritime activity on the local coastline. The current Santa Cruz Wharf—as it is now formally called—is actually the sixth such structure on the waterfront since the first pier, known as the Potato Chute Wharf (and later extended into the Cowell Wharf), was built off the present site of the Sea and Sand Motel during the Gold Rush.

Subsequent structures included the Gharky Wharf (later known as the Powder Mill Wharf), built near the foot of present-day Main Street in 1857; the Railroad Wharf, constructed in 1875 just west of the current pier; the Connecting (or "S") Wharf, built two years later to link the Powder Mill and Railroad wharves; and the Pleasure Pier, built by the Beach, Cottage and Tent City Corporation



Photo: ©Bob Barbour

(later consolidated into the Santa Cruz Seaside Company) to facilitate a number of recreational activities on the Boardwalk and Main Beach.

What is often forgotten about the current wharf—2,745 feet long and composed of 4,528 wooden piles—is that it was originally built by the City of Santa Cruz in 1914 to accommodate large steamships arriving at the port of Santa Cruz daily.

During the final days of the Railroad Wharf and the beginnings of the present wharf, more than sixty families emigrated to Santa Cruz from a small fishing village on the Italian Riviera called Riva Trigoso. The "Rivani"—with a complex network of families with last names that

included Bassano, Bregante, Canepa, Carniglia, Cecchini, Ghio, Loero, Olivieri, Stagnaro and Zolezzi—fished the waters of Monterey Bay for the better part of a century.

One of those early immigrants was Mateo Stagnaro, who first arrived in Santa Cruz in 1906 as a fisherman with his brother Steffano. Stagnaro was a common name in Riva Trigoso, like Johnson or Smith, and at one point, there were five separate Stagnaro families in Santa Cruz. (Mateo and Steffano were not related to the Cottardo Stagnaro family, which presently runs Gilda's restaurant and the sport fishing trips at the Harbor.)





(Left) Brothers Ernie (left) and John Stagnaro worked side by side on the wharf for more than a half century. Ernie, who served in the Navy during World War II, passed away in 2008 at the age of 88; John, who kept the family business running during the war, died in 2004 at the age of 90.

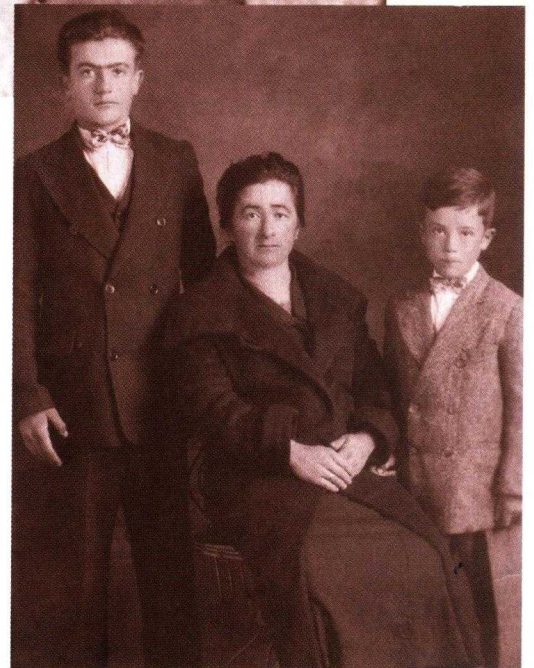
(Right) John and his wife Mamie; Virginia and husband Ernie at their new cocktail counter in the 1940s. Young Johnny Ghio, who worked for the family, is in the background.



Like many of the Rivani fishermen, Mateo traveled back and forth between the U.S. and Italy. At the end of World War I, his wife, Teresa, and their young son, Giovanni, emigrated to the United States aboard the passenger liner Giuseppe Verdi to join Mateo in Santa Cruz, where they moved to the city's Italian neighborhood—known as the “Barranca”—and settled into their home on Gharky Street. Ernesto was born in 1920.

In 1926, Mateo died of pneumonia, leaving his widow and young sons to fend for themselves—Teresa working in local canneries, John in the fishing industry for “Big Jim” Perez, and Ernest selling newspapers. Teresa’s sister, Carolina Castagnola, also emigrated from Italy to help with the family duties.

(Right) John Stagnaro (left), his mother Teresa Castagnola Stagnaro, and brother Ernie, circa 1930.







(Above) Italian fishing boats or “fellucas,” which featured a lanteen sail, are moored next to the Railroad Wharf, circa 1907. The castle-like Sea Beach Hotel with its Queen Anne style turrets can be seen in the distance.

It was in the 1930s that John Stagnaro first began working for Joe Urbani at his fish house on the wharf, the lone establishment on the leeward side of the structure. In 1937, he bought out Urbani, bringing in his mother and younger brother as partners. The following year, the brothers took over the management of the Shell Oil Company station on the wharf, used for fueling fishing boats and barges. The operation has been expanding ever since.

After World War II, the family moved to their present site on the western side of the pier, and they expanded into their current building, with its two-story restaurant and gorgeous bay views, in 1986.

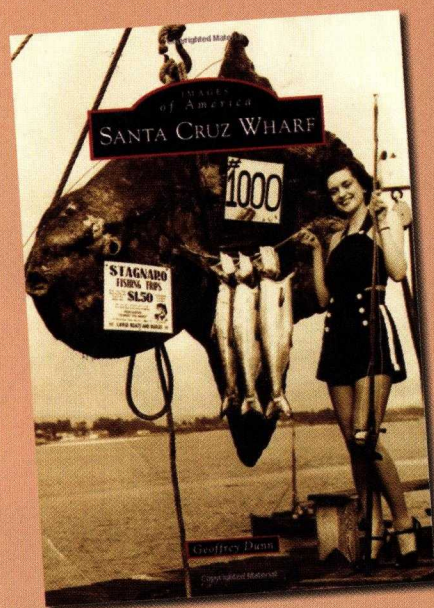
Over the years, John and Ernie brought their wives into the business, Mamie and Virginia (both alive today in their 90s), along with their five daughters (and their husbands) in various capacities—Sharon and

Larry Bryson; Jeannie and Bob McPherson; Carol and Dick Tuttle; Theresa and “Skip” Tara; Darlene and Ken Dyer. Today, fourth and fifth generation family members are now working in the business.

At the top of the stairwell to the second story of the family restaurant on the wharf, there’s a large reproduction of a poster for the great “Day on the Bay” gatherings that celebrated the Italian fishing community in Santa Cruz during the 1930s and ‘40s. In the lower left corner of the poster is a picture entitled “Smilin’ Ernie.”

“That’s my dad,” says Darlene, pointing lovingly at the image. “He had ‘Santa Claus’ eyes. They all had rough hands from working with the fish, but he had a very sweet disposition. When I’m here at the restaurant, I feel him here with me. It’s very comforting. I know how hard they all worked. I want to honor that legacy.”

## For Your Library



### **Santa Cruz Wharf** (Images of America) by Geoffrey Dunn

#### **From the Introduction:**

For the past century, the Santa Cruz Wharf has been an iconic structure on the California Coast, serving as a gateway not only to the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary, but also as a primary destination point for millions of visitors to Central California.

With a rich and fabled fishing and shipping legacy, the wharf continues to serve as an important economic engine in the region, hosting a wide array of fine restaurants, fish houses, gift shops and recreational outlets for both visitors and locals alike.

Its panoramic views of the bay and the surrounding coastal mountain ranges are truly magnificent, from the peaks of the Santa Lucia range to the south, to those of the Santa Cruz Mountains northward...

It’s a place, I would argue, where you can also find yourself. The Santa Cruz Wharf provides both external and internal vistas simply not to be found anywhere on land, a place for contemplation, reflection and quietude.