

## 1001 Stagnaros

*By Geoffrey Dunn*

One of Robert "Big Boy" Stagnaro's earliest childhood memories is of a small hole next to his father's fish market on the Santa Cruz Municipal Wharf. Through it he could see the sparkling blue and green waters of Monterey Bay and a patch of weathered wharf pilings covered with mussels, barnacles, starfish and long clumps of seaweed swaying with the tides. "My life began at the edge of that hole," says Big Boy, the magic of the memory lingering in his eyes.

Big Boy was four years old then, and his father had cut out the hole so that his youngest son could fish through it while the rest of the family carried out the duties of running a fish business. "He made sure it was small enough so that I couldn't fall in," Big Boy remembers, "but it was large enough for me to pull fish up. And believe me, I used to catch a lot of fish through that hole."

A few years later, Big Boy was set loose from his tiny fishing grounds and given free reign of the entire wharf. He would scamper from fishing boat to fishing boat, listening to the old Italian fishermen speak in their native dialects about the day's weather and their catches.

Whenever he got into trouble with one of the fishermen, Big Boy would hurry off to an old Model T truck parked across the street from the wharf's fish houses. Inside was his grandfather, Cottardo Peter Stagnaro I, who had a special fondness for his last grandson, given the name Big Boy at birth because he had weighed only one pound and had nearly died in a pool of blood.

Cottardo I was in his seventies and permanently injured, the victim of a boating accident years earlier, but there was still a fierceness to his presence as he watched the final days of his life through the windshield of the fish truck.

"I was his pet. Nobody could touch me when I was with him," says Big Boy. "He couldn't walk anymore, but he seemed somehow larger than life. I always knew that as long as I was with him, I was safe. Nobody—and I mean nobody—ever crossed him."

The man nobody ever crossed was born in Riva Trigoso, Italy in 1859. By the time he was 10, he was a veteran seaman on merchant ships sailing along the Mediterranean Coast. By the time he was 15, he had crossed the Atlantic three times. In 1874, while his vessel was unloading cargo on the old Santa Cruz Railroad Wharf, he jumped ship and decided to call Santa Cruz his new home.

The young sailor had four sisters in Riva Trigoso, and in the ensuing decades he traveled back and forth between Italy and America, eventually bringing three of his sisters, their husbands and nearly 60 other families from Riva to the west side banks of Santa Cruz. For over 40 years, "La Barranca," as it was called, hosted a thriving Italian fishing colony—and Cottardo I was the recognized patriarch.

Maria Zolezzi Stagnaro, Cottardo's wife, immigrated to the United States in 1898, bringing along with her an adolescent son, Cottardo II. In 1900, at the family home on Bay Street, she gave birth to another son, Malio, and a waterfront dynasty was born.

In the next half-century, Cottardo I and II, Malio and Cottardo II's children fashioned a mini-wharf empire, the C. Stagnaro Fishing Corporation, which would come to include two restaurants, coffee shops, a dozen fishing vessels, three speed boats, a fish market and a marine fuel station.

"There were so many of us," says Big Boy, "we had to expand. We didn't have any choice. During the Depression, our business actually grew because of all the hard work we put into it and all the hungry mouths we had to feed. That's when the family got the nickname the '1001 Stagnaros.'

"The wharf was always exciting back then," he emphasizes. "I couldn't wait for the school bell to ring so that I could go down there and work. I lived for that every day.

"The amount of fish brought in when I was young was incredible. Tons of salmon, sea bass, rock cod, sole and sable fish. There were 75 to 100 boats unloading their catches on any given day, and as soon as the boats were emptied, the men were back at work mending their nets and baiting their lines."

When it was built in 1914, the east side of the wharf was lined with a series of davits, small hand cranes that hoisted the fishing fleet to the dock whenever rough weather was imminent. The building of the small craft harbor in the 1960s brought about the demise of the davits and their departure changed the wharf forever. "The wharf lost its color then," says Big Boy. "We'll never bring those days back."

Big Boy is not the only Stagnaro nostalgic about the wharf's colorful past. If her younger brother's first memories are of fishing, Gilda Stagnaro's are of truck rides with her Uncle Malio and five-cent ice cream cones. "I remember my father buying us ice cream and of listening to the beautiful Italian language of the fishermen," she reminisces. "It was music to my ears, like a serenade or an aria all the time."

While Big Boy and the rest of her brothers worked daily on the boats and in the fish market, Gilda's initial destiny appeared to be far away from the wharf. She was an honors student in languages at Santa Cruz High and had dreams of serving in the diplomatic corps as a translator. Her first job was with the Chamber of Commerce in 1941, but by the end of World War II she was back working full time at the wharf with the rest of her family.

"I filled in everywhere at first—in the coffee shop, the market, handling fish and game tags," she says smiling. "But after a while, I wound up running the coffee shop. You might say I found my niche."

In 1972 the Stagnaros renovated their Sports Fishers Coffee Shop into a full, 134-seat seafood restaurant--Gilda's--and the lady after whom the restaurant was named found herself putting in 18-hour-and-over days, but never time to marry. "I ran myself pretty hard," she acknowledges in a characteristic understatement, "but the family needed me, so I was there."

In the 1980s, Gilda's restaurant is the last remaining holding of the original C. Stagnaro Corporation. A series of family deaths, the decline of the local fisheries and difficult business conditions all contributed to the family releasing itself from its various enterprises. Only Big Boy, Gilda, and Big Boy's children, Dino (recently brought in as a manager) and Laura, remain working in the family enterprise.

"It gets harder and harder each year to make it," declares Big Boy. "Increase in food and labor costs, insurance and rents have all added to our problems. Plus, with all the new businesses on the wharf, parking isn't adequate out here during peak periods. We don't get the kind of overflow crowds in the restaurant as often as we used to."

According to Gilda, the city-sponsored expansion on the wharf has been a mixed blessing.

"I feel we were ready for a facelift, but there was a lack of forethought in respect to business conditions. The increase in the number of businesses—with all their additional employees, never mind their customers—greatly exceeds the increase in parking."

In spite of the business demands placed upon them by the modern era, the Stagnaros still manage to bring a little of the cherished old days into their restaurant.

"We don't know everyone like we used to," says Gilda, "but our forte here is still the personal touch.

"You know, this hustle-and-bustle today never stops me from recognizing how fortunate we are to live here in Santa Cruz. I always take time to look out the windows and marvel at the sunsets. I used to want to go out and see the world, but now the world comes to me. Visitors from all over the globe walk in each day, and we always try to make them feel at home."

Indeed, it is a lot like the old days, and even if her spaghetti sauce isn't quite as good as her mother's used to be, her smile is just as warm, and the lines around her and her brother's eyes have such rich stories to tell.

## Sources

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