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Women at the Helm

story by Barbara Lehman Smith

Our series by Barbara Lehman Smith about women in restaurant partnerships on Martha's Vineyard, continues with Jen Smyth of Slice of Life in Oak Bluffs.



photo by L.A. Brown

An Unsung Hero

On a commute over to the Vineyard on the *Island Home* ferry, it doesn't take much small talk with a few locals on board to learn the conventional wisdom about Slice of Life. The year-round restaurant is in Oak Bluffs, one of two island towns where the ferry docks. To many of us mainlanders, it might seem odd to note that the restaurant operates throughout the calendar year, but in this seasonal, resort community, "open year-round" is a big deal to residents.

With the widespread appeal of its service, prices, and menu favorites (big winners: the

Asian Salmon Salad and the Fried Green Tomato BLT), the casual-dining venue on Circuit Avenue is something of an unsung hero, especially during "season" when fine dining choices abound. With all due respect to the Vineyard's more glamorous counterparts, one islander puts it this way: "It's nice to see them finally getting some attention."

But for Jennifer (Jen) and Peter (Pete) Smyth, the husband-and-wife team who own "Slice," as the locals call it, going out of the way to get attention is simply not their style. Even when they bought the restaurant in February

2009, about half of the regulars never even noticed the transition, a rare achievement in the hospitality business. Credit for the seamless changeover was due in large part to Pete, who had been chef at the establishment for six years when the former owners approached him about buying it. But Jen, a native of Oak Bluffs, understood the local perspective better than most.

"Everyone's biggest fear when they hear about new ownership is that everything's going to change," Jen says, "so we worked really hard not to change anything. We've added things to

the menu but haven't yet taken anything off. Now we're going to slowly put our touch on things," Pete's breakfast pizza, for example. She's serious when she talks but punctuates the sentence with a warm laugh that resonates within Slice of Life's windowed-porch seating area. While "in season" in the early dinner hour, there's a waiting list and often a line out the door, but even during what Jen calls the "lull" of the off-season, the door bangs open and closed, the telephone rings, and conversations amplify as tables fill.

The daughter of a guidance counselor and a teacher, Jen exudes a patience and diligence that may be a by-product of her DNA, but also reflects her easygoing island nature. One of the most striking things about thirty-two-year-old Jennifer Smyth—wife, mother of a four-year-old daughter, and business professional—is how effortlessly she rolls with things. She manages two high-performance jobs (well, three, including motherhood.) Along with front-of-the-house proprietor at Slice of Life—handling bookkeeping, scheduling, billing, payroll, and vendors, Jen is the office administrator for Sheriff's Meadow Foundation, a non-profit land-conservation organization and the largest private landowner on Martha's Vineyard. But Jen sees these positions as playing off one another. "What I do here is similar to what I do at Sheriff's Meadow," she says. "It's one of the things that made me comfortable when we bought the restaurant. I knew I could handle the business side."

She doesn't care to change anything in her schedule right now. Looking ahead to mid-July, though, Jen foresees a perfect storm of sorts when the foundation hosts its annual summer benefit (and biggest fundraiser) and the restaurant is in high season. She gives an understated laugh, "Yes, I'll be a little busy ... just a little." But she's quick to credit her mother, Joyce Dresser, for helping her to orchestrate her busy schedule by providing child care for her daughter, Shealy'n.

Jen worked in restaurants part-time for years, but her degree from the College of the Atlantic in Bar Harbor, Maine, is in human ecology and focused on the environment and its communities. It wasn't until 2002 when she married her chef husband, who studied culinary arts at Newbury College, that the idea of owning a food business (whether restaurant or catering service) became a possibility. The newlyweds moved to Martha's Vineyard the next year.

"Part of the reason to move here was the opportunity to own a business," she says. "You come to realize at some point, it's all about connection." Jen calls Pete, who grew up in Worcester, Massachusetts, a "city boy," implying by inflection that the prospect of moving to an island was an easy sell. Pete worked briefly at an inn and another Vineyard restaurant before he settled behind the open kitchen as head chef at Slice of Life.

With its three-tiered glass bakery-case, flanked by a soda refrigerator on one side and neatly-displayed wine bottles and an organic-coffee bar on the other, and with intimate seating for forty-two, part of Slice of Life's appeal is its uncluttered aesthetics. With that and its ample



Slice of Life Café's Jen and Pete Smyth are pictured in the photos at left and above.

photo by Valerie Somenthal

servings of fresh, imaginative fare and specials (such as the sirloin and caramelized-onion, thin-crust pizza,) it's easy to see why many local enthusiasts say they visit multiple times a week, whether for breakfast, lunch, or dinner. The dining area has a comfortable, kitchen-table feel, with an elegance that perhaps invites better manners.

Jen aptly describes Slice as an "in-between place," for she sees it as somewhere between a venue considered only for on-premise dining and a soup-and-sandwich takeout joint. Takeout orders comprise more than a third of food sales and wait staff handle both the counter and dining room, so Jen says she takes that into consideration. The staff "pool tips and we pay more than minimum wage," she explains, because the job's more labor intensive with waiters handling takeout, making specialty coffee drinks, uncorking and serving wine, compared to "another kind of place that has a bartender."

The number of employees almost doubles from

the off-season average of fourteen to about twenty-four during peak season. "We're a nice, relaxing, calm kind of place where you can come have a good consistent meal that's not forty dollars a plate, and that's what we strive for." Learning about the hearty praise from the locals, Jen seems genuinely moved. "That's why we keep it open year-round. When you hear those positive things and you see the regulars come back, time after time."

Already members of the Oak Bluffs Association, which "puts together festivals and peak-season events," Jen and Pete also joined the Massachusetts Restaurant Association. She doesn't deny that one of her ulterior motives may have been to savor some rare alone time with her husband—even if it's spent at the Boston food show, comparing new computer systems. "It was great just to see what people are doing, see the food vendors, products, services." Plus, she notes, "Sometimes we're limited here in terms of what we can get on the island," and it's great to learn about new trends.

"I'd like to learn a little more and see what's going on ... I'd like to go to New York," Jen says. Asked if this is merely a cover for spending future quality-time with Pete, she just laughs, and recalls a story about buying the restaurant when their daughter was only a toddler. "Everyone kept asking, 'When are you going to have another?' And I said, 'We just bought our second baby!'"

It's a common refrain among island business people that the summers pass by too quickly, but as she and Pete prepare for their third summer as owner-operators, Jennifer disagrees. "What goes by way too fast is the winter! All of a sudden you realize, 'The summer is upon us again!'" She smiles broadly, conveying her readiness for the challenge. And from those in the know, it's a win-win gamble: Bet on the local favorite. ❖

For information go to www.sliceoflifemv.com, and to learn about the foundation, go to www.sheriffsmeadow.org.

AVALON contributing writer Barbara Lehman Smith is the author of the biography *Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones: The Artist Who Lived Twice* (Outskirts Press, 2010) and writes freelance for various magazines and newspapers. A native of Massachusetts, Barbara lives in Maryland with her husband and three children, and is a frequent visitor to Martha's Vineyard.