

Categories: COVER STORY

Date: Jun 19, 2008

Title: Silverton family honors a legacy of Food and Community

BY PAULINE ADAMEK

Silverton family honors a legacy of Food and Community



The Silverton family legacy connects food and community (R-L: Gail Silverton, Andreas Krankl, Larry Silverton, Nancy Silverton, Joel Gutman).

www.robtevens.com

Silverton family honors a legacy of Food and Community

BY PAULINE ADAMEK

The story of the Silverton family is a fascinating tale of how many successful businesses have been developed and nurtured, creating a legacy that entwines food with community. Importantly, these enterprises are driven more by heart than by fiscal reward, and reap greater successes than anyone had anticipated.

This tale starts with a benevolent patriarch, Lawrence S. Silverton. A construction lawsuit-attorney, savvy businessman, real estate tycoon and coffee, calligraphy and motorcycle enthusiast, Larry used his business acumen and support to enable his two daughters, Nancy and Gail, to make an indelible mark on the Los Angeles landscape and beyond. Now he's assisting his six grandchildren in their studies and burgeoning business enterprises.

Larry Silverton's Story:

Born in South Dakota, Larry moved to Sherman Oaks and started a family with his wife, Doris. When most mothers in the 1950s were taking advantage of labor-saving technologies, Doris, a journalist and writer, taught her daughters the goodness of lentils, goat's cheese and a beautifully set table. This gave the Silverton sisters an appreciation of the heart and hearth of family and a desire, later, to create a product and environment that could contribute to the community.

Elder daughter Nancy's interest was in fine cuisine, so she was sent to train at the Le Cordon Bleu cooking school in London, regarded as one of the most elite chef-training institutions in the world. Nancy also studied pastry and dessert technique at École Le Notre in France, also famous for their pastry shop in Bastille, Paris.

Nancy Silverton's Story:

In 1989, Nancy opened Campanile Restaurant and La Brea Bakery, still situated on La Brea just north of Wilshire Boulevard, along with (then-husband) chef Mark Peel and (then brother-in-law) manager Manfred Krankl.

“As far as opening Campanile, my father helped us put together a prospectus and form a limited partnership, finding us investors – over 30 – and he was also an investor,” Nancy recalled. Larry also purchased and restored the building.

Nancy had worked at various restaurants in California, including as the assistant pastry chef at Michaels' restaurant in Santa Monica for a couple of years when it opened. She was the inaugural pastry chef at Wolfgang Puck's original Spago for two years, leaving to work in New York restaurants and pursue further study. She returned to Spago in 1988 while preparing to open Campanile.

“When we started looking for a location for Campanile, we thought it would also be good if we could also open up a little retail and wholesale bread bakery,” Nancy said. “I didn't realize how much I didn't know when I started playing with that idea.”

Nancy re-enrolled in baking school, and between classes, worked in a bakery in Paris. When she returned to L.A. to start practicing loaves of bread – just a few months before they opened – Nancy described her first attempts as “just disastrous.”

“I made tons of bricks. I thought, I went to that amazing school and I got that experience – I'll bring all these recipes back and I'll be successful. But that wasn't the case. That really was an awakening to me,” she said. “It certainly had its positive impact on the [subsequent] success of La Brea Bakery in that I just had to figure out for myself, through so much trial and error, how to make a decent loaf of bread.”

Nancy sold her bread to other local chefs for use in their restaurants across the city. Soon, word spread and demand for her unique offerings grew. Eventually she created over 100 award-winning varieties of crusty, high-quality loaves, which are now found in stores and restaurants nationally.

In 2001, Nancy and her partners sold their 80 percent share of La Brea Bakery for \$56 million, selling the remainder the following year. Nancy then worked as a guest chef in friends' restaurants, notably presenting “Mozzarella Thursdays” at Suzanne Tracht's restaurant, Jar.

She took steps to open Pizzeria Mozza in 2006 with New York restaurant giant and “Iron Chef” star Mario Batali. Last year, the more upscale Osteria Mozza opened next door, on Melrose at Highland, and both restaurants remain hot spots among L.A.'s fickle restaurant cognoscenti. Next is a Mozza take-out and delivery storefront, and Nancy also has future plans to open a Mozza offshoot in the Valley.

Gail Silverton's Story:

Larry's second daughter, Gail, studied childhood development at California State University Northridge, but switched to a career in fashion. After her first birth, she began teaching at her son's nursery school.

While pregnant with daughter Annika, her third and youngest child, and going through a divorce, Gail completed her certification to qualify as a child care director.

She and her then-partner opened a home daycare center while building a pre-school. Then, in 1989, The Neighborhood School – the first of three – opened in Sherman Oaks.

“I opened my nursery school while I was living on Matilija Street, the same street I grew up on. I was working at Oakdale, the pre-school where my kids were going. My sister was opening the restaurant and the bakery and neither of us had a dime. Her family moved in with my family. She had two kids and I had two kids and one on the way, and we all lived in my little house in Sherman Oaks,” Gail recalled recently.

“Every night we’d go down to the bakery and feed the starters. She would come home with massive armloads of loaves and we’d all sit around the table and taste the bread, and break it open and feel it on our cheek and smell it and decide when it was right. She spent months. She is fanatical and obsessive and she will not stop until it is exactly right.”



Gail realized she needed to earn a living, and decided to open a nursery school. The house next door to her became available for rent and she seized the chance to run a business while staying near her children. While acquiring permits from the city, she ran the school out of her own home for the first year.

“It’s very much a family-operated school,” she said. “I still hold all the meetings and events at my home. The school itself is a real community. Parents come in for coffee and hang around. I wanted more of that.”

In 2007, in partnership with husband Joel Gutman, Gail opened the Gelato Bar on Tujunga Avenue in Studio City. “This really was more about community than gelato,” she stated. “When I was looking to open something, it was more about finding the right location and then deciding what was best. It could have even been hot dogs and knishes if it was right.”

Gail took out the lease in mid-November 2006, and passed out free samples of gelato during the annual Tujunga Village Open House block party two weeks later. The reaction was wildly enthusiastic, and since their grand opening on Labor Day 2007, the Gelato Bar has continued to draw a loyal base of customers.

“I live here, my school is here and 90 percent of the people who walk in here, I already know,” Gail noted. “I’m invested in this community.”

Andreas Krankl’s Story:

With backing from Larry and others, Gail’s eldest son Andreas recently opened his first venture, Press Panini, which he eventually hopes to franchise across the nation.

In late 2005, Nancy Silverton’s gourmet cook book, “Sandwich Book: The Best Sandwiches Ever – from Thursday Nights at Campanile” was published. Andreas remembers receiving a copy inscribed by Nancy: “To my nephew – now you can cook a sandwich.”

Prophetic words: In April, Andreas opened Press Panini, a walk-up stand right near Gail's Gelato Bar on Tujunga Avenue.



Larry Silverton and grandson Andreas Krankl at Press Panini.

www.robtevens.com

"I've always liked playing with food as a medium of art," Andreas said. "I remember being a kid and putting on four-course dinners for the whole family. I always loved coming up with the ideas, then the execution and even to the presentation at the end. I was 12."

Andreas managed the Gelato Bar for its first year, but was keen to explore his idea for a sandwich shop, which he fleshed out during his senior year of college three years ago. Gail wanted to serve sandwiches, but couldn't obtain a food license at her location. Currently, Gail can hot-press Andreas' sandwiches over at her café.

With 30 choices – such as Teriyaki Chicken, Fajita Chicken, Eggplant Parmigiana, Cuban Club and Hot Pastrami – Andreas offers a cosmopolitan experience. And best of all, he keeps it local.



"I live right down the street and I just love it that I can walk here. L.A. has grown so big that now we're shrinking back into our communities. That's a big trend; people are going to work and eat and shop closer to home."

Back to Larry:

Larry also backed Gail's second son and Andreas' brother, Nik, with his coffee shop in Boston called Taste. Larry insisted Nik gain practical experience in a coffee shop before opening one of his own, so he accompanied Nik to the coffee company Intelligentsia in Chicago, where they took a one-day espresso making class.

"Nancy had something like ten or so years experience before she opened her first restaurant," Larry noted. "She started out waiting tables. It takes training – you don't just jump in."

Within the past 20 years, both Nancy and Gail married and then divorced, while Doris, Larry's wife of

53 years, passed away in 2001.

Says Larry, “The thing about my daughters and I, they taught me as many things as I’ve taught them. Coming from South Dakota, you are not very sophisticated about food. Nancy really opened the whole door of food and espresso. She started me on espresso and it’s part of my life now.”

Currently, Larry, an Encino resident, is working on a community project called The Shakespeare Center on First Street in downtown L.A., which will allow underprivileged high school students from Watts and South L.A. to rewrite Shakespeare’s plays in modern-day language and present them in on-site productions.

What keeps this lifelong doer so vibrant and engaged?

“Could it be espresso drinking?” he asked, chuckling. “My mother always said, ‘Don’t die curious – if you have a question in mind, go find out what’s happening.’ I guess I’m just too nosey.”

At 82, he still rides a Moto Guzzi and a BMW. He makes a study of es-presso, practices pilates, composes elegant calligraphy, and has been known to take guitar and tango lessons. He travels to Italy several times a year, where, known locally as “Lorenzo,” he meets up with his Italian teacher in Umbria.

Ever modest, Larry doesn’t see himself as a boss in his family’s ventures, or as a controlling partner. “On my business card I use a Mafioso term, ‘Consigliere,’ which means advisor. He was the guy behind the scenes. That’s me.”

While Gail’s children have their father’s last name, Krankl, Nancy’s children, Vanessa, Ben and Oliver, are all Silverton-Peel. Annika, Gail’s youngest child, is currently working in Larry’s real estate office in Encino, and eventually wants to be a therapist. Nancy’s daughter Vanessa works in New York City for Al Franken’s Air America network. Ben is training to be a chef. Oliver, 15, is still in school.

Gail and her three children attended Oakwood School in North Hollywood, as did two of Nancy’s three kids.

Larry’s advice for his next wave of maturing grandchildren is simple: “You gotta like what you are doing.”