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MAGAZINE

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INSIDE

Extra-Fine Dining

DO SAN DIEGANS CARE ABOUT DINING OUT? Passionately. Are we opinionated about what's best? Intensely. How intensely? Traditionally, our Best Restaurants issues are among the most popular with readers. And readers don't just peruse them; they use them—month after month, even year after year. They are, in fact, among the most dog-eared *San Diego Magazines* of all. For lots of reasons.

First, we don't just ask you what you like. Although we do give you ballots. And we value your votes. But we also tell you what we think you should try. This month, in addition to the

readers' poll results, we bring you oenophile Tom Gable's scouting guide to the wave of hip new wine bars making a splash all across the region. We give you restaurant critic David Nelson's take on three eateries that have provided great food and good value for years. Next, Nelson wades in with his own votes for best restaurants. And, not to be outdone, the editor offers up his own picks.

Of course, the issue isn't devoted entirely to dining. This month, we start with an *amuse-bouche* in the form of an interview with controversial beauty queen Carrie Prejean, along with a closer look, by associate editor Adam Elder, at the tiny San Diego Christian College where she gets her religion-based education. **From there, we whet your appetites with an in-depth Dialogue with one of San Diego's more successful restaura-**



BREVIN BLACH

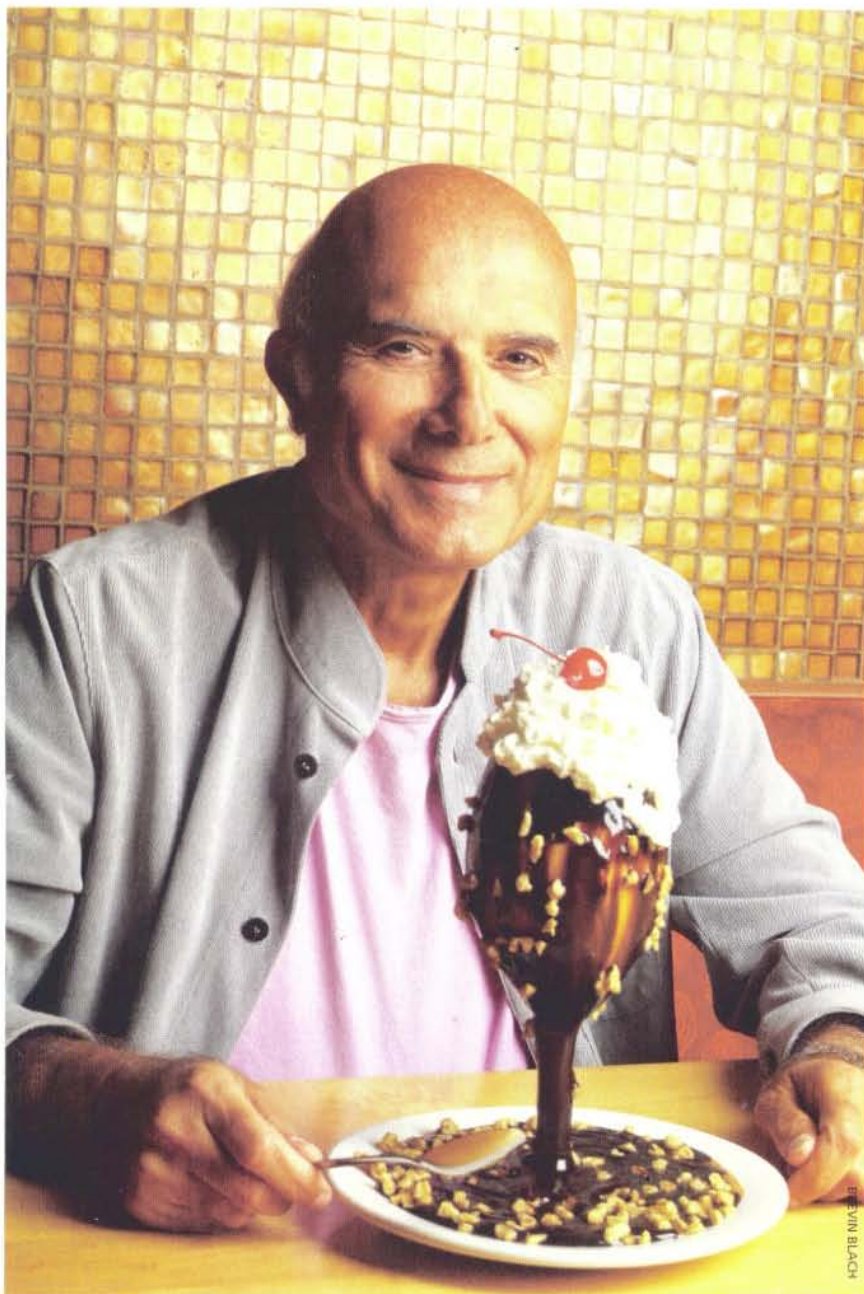
teurs, Sami Ladeki—of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza fame. And *San Diego At Home* editor Rowena Kelley presents the 2009 ASID Design Excellence Awards, a stunning guide to the best in local interior design and homebuilding.

The main course offers a choice of two meaty entrées: a profile of author and globetrotting San Diego professor Mary Duncan by former *San Diego Union-Tribune* reporter and longtime editor Carl Larsen, and the final installment in S.D. Liddick's powerful Border Trilogy, which provides some hope for a solution to the bloody drug wars ravaging our neighbor to the south.

It's a lot to digest in one sitting. We suggest you nibble away at it a bite at a time. And wash it down with a nice Chardonnay or Cabernet. Cheers!

TOM BLAIR
Editor in Chief

Sami Ladeki



SAMMY'S WOODFIRED PIZZA is celebrating its 20th anniversary this year as the most successful full-service restaurant group in San Diego. And the biggest serving of credit goes to its founder, Sami Ladeki, a food-and-beverage man who took a long and winding road from his native Lebanon through Germany, England, New Orleans, Las Vegas, Houston, San Francisco, Atlanta and Los Angeles to San Diego, where he's stayed put for two decades. Our taste buds owe him a huge debt of gratitude. Ladeki has ventured forth into other restaurant realms, including Tokyo, where he franchised his pizza concept. But the path always leads back to Sammy's, with 17 branches in Southern California and Nevada. A generous philanthropist and consistent political contributor, he lives in La Jolla with his wife, Sharon.

TOM BLAIR: Happy anniversary.

SAMI LADEKI: Yes, thank you. We opened June 15, 1989, in La Jolla.

TB: And that one is packed every time I go there. Your restaurant group has been phenomenally successful, but it was a long road to success. You started in the food-and-beverage game in New Orleans, right?

SL: I had gone to hotel-and-restaurant school in Germany. I came to the United States—to New Orleans—in 1968, to work at the Royal Sonesta Hotel. The Sonesta had written to the school to recruit employees, and I applied.

TB: Had this been part of a career plan for you?

SL: No. It ended up being life-changing. I was just 23, working in London, and I had a five-year plan. In Europe, in the hotel and restaurant business, the most important asset you can have is knowledge of languages, because the Germans, the British and the French obviously all speak different languages. I expected to stay in Europe and spend a year in England, a year in Spain, a year in France . . . because I spoke a lot of languages, and that was a good thing.

TB: But you landed in the U.S., and you've been here 40 years.

SL: Right. And I can still barely speak English.

TB: Ha. Was the Royal Sonesta smooth sailing for you?

SL: No, I was there for six months when I got a letter—greetings from Richard Nixon. This was during Vietnam.

TB: You were drafted?

SL: Really. I was scared to hell. I went to Immigration; the officer looked at my file—he was a nice guy—he said, "So what's the problem?" I said, "I've gotta get out of this." He said, "The only thing you can do is surrender your visa, and you can leave the country. No questions asked. But you can never come back." I didn't want to leave. So I thought about it and thought about it and said, *So what, I'm going to stay and do it.* So I served.

TB: And you were sent to Vietnam?

SL: They sent me to Fort Polk, Louisiana. And they put me in the mess hall.

TB: You didn't get any of your recipes for Sammy's from the Army mess, did you?

SL: No, no, but we used to feed 2,000 people a day.

TB: Well, you serve a few more than that now. How many Sammy's are there today?

DIALOGUE

SL: We have 17 Sammy's and one Roppongi, in La Jolla.

TB: You shared a story, almost 20 years ago, about how you opened that first Sammy's. Something to do with maxing out some credit cards.

SL: Actually, I went to the SBA and was able to do a small-business loan. But there was a last-minute glitch with the paperwork. They had paid me almost everything, but I was waiting for the last \$50,000 check for operating expenses. It wasn't really my intention to open with credit cards. But this truck driver showed up the next day with a first order of \$15,000 worth of silverware and china ... and I said, "Do you take credit cards?" He said yes.

TB: Amazing.

SL: I had to open. I had to pay my employees and my bills. What are you gonna do?

TB: Looks like it was a good gamble.

SL: The first week we opened, nobody came. The second week, it was packed. There was a line outside. In the beginning, I made more money than I thought I would in my whole life. Two months later, I called the SBA and said, "I'm paying you off."

TB: Okay, we just took a shortcut from New Orleans to La Jolla. You didn't come to La Jolla right out of the Army.

SL: I went back to New Orleans. And then, in 1976, I got a call from Caesars Palace in Las Vegas. It was the ultimate hotel at that time. Sinatra was performing there ...

TB: Did you meet Sinatra?

SL: Yeah. But you'd never want to meet this guy. You never knew what kind of mood he was going to be in. If you looked at him, and he was in a bad mood, forget it. I avoided him.

TB: Did you stay at Caesars for long?

SL: One year. It wasn't for me. I was brought in to do corporate work. But it was different then; not corporate. Practically everything was free. The food and beverage revenue was \$30 million that year. Fifty percent of that \$30 million was comped.

TB: After you left Las Vegas, you hop-scotched around the country, from hotel jobs to nightclubs to restaurants. And then you landed in San Diego. How did that happen?

SL: I came here for a visit with my brother, and we went for coffee at the old Broken Yolk in La Jolla. He told me the space in the building across the way was available. It was just being finished. I loved the place and made a deal with them.

TB: You've been in food and beverage for more than 40 years. Are you a chef? Did you ever cook for anybody else — other than in the Army?

SL: I cooked for my girlfriends.

TB: And that was it?

SL: Well, I've always been around food. I studied it in school. I learned the principles.

TB: But all of the great pizzas and salads and pastas on Sammy's menu — how do you get your recipes? Or do you just have good taste buds?

SL: I'd call myself an intellectual chef. It's a result of all the connections I've made — my experience traveling, sampling different cultures. And also, I'm into it. I have a passion for it. And maybe it is about taste buds, too. There's nothing on the menu I didn't taste and approve.

TB: So you started this all on a shoestring — all the money you had, all you could raise and borrow ...

SL: All successful people do it that way.

TB: You started with a few pastas, a few pizzas and a few salads — in La Jolla, which is already flooded with restaurants — and you became an instant success. What was the secret?

SL: To do something different. I visited every restaurant in San Diego County. I was unemployed, so I had all the time in the world. And there was no place in San Diego where they even had a wood-fired oven. They were all over Los Angeles, but nobody was doing that kind of pizza here.



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O'Riordan & Associates is pleased to announce that former KFMB news anchor Stan Miller has joined the firm as marketing director. Stan is one of the most trusted journalists in San Diego and is a perfect fit for the O'Riordan team.

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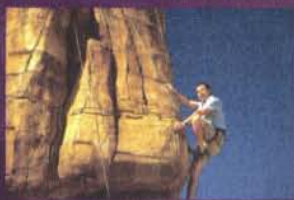
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DIALOGUE

TB: What's your favorite menu item at Sammy's?

SL: It's not about my favorite; it's the customers' favorite. I have people coming back to San Diego from a trip—they still have their suitcase in the car—and they come in, and I say, "What are you doing here?" And they say, "I gotta have my chopped salad." I can never take that chopped salad off our menu.

TB: And don't ever take the Caesar salad off the menu. You've tried establishing other types of restaurants, with mixed success, but it basically comes back to Sammy's, doesn't it?

SL: For a while, I got tired of Sammy's. I figured I needed to create a new concept. I guess I had to get it out of my system. The others made money, but it was becoming so difficult with all the Sammy's, and then you have a steakhouse here and a fish house there, a hotel here and a Roppongi there.

TB: You have a reputation as a perfectionist. Are you a tough guy to work for?

SL: I take care of my people. I have four millionaires in the company. We give people a lot of incentives. I've always tried to create good working conditions for the staff. They work five days a week, either dinner or lunch. I didn't want them working day and night. And they have to take two days off in a row. Everybody has a weekly schedule, so they can have a life.

TB: If I went to your house for dinner and you cooked, would I have to go pick up some takeout food later? Would I be able to eat anything you cooked?

SL: Oh, absolutely. I'm a good cook. I can make some Lebanese food for you. I can make humus, tabouli, spaghetti Bolognese. I'm interested in food, but when I left Lebanon to go to Germany to study, I studied political science—to be a diplomat. Thank God I didn't stay with it. I would have started World War III. My goal wasn't to be where I am now. My goal was to have \$3,000 a month, a little car and an apartment for \$750 bucks a month. It's easy to make money. Now, my biggest problem is what to do with all the money.

TB: Well, if you have a problem deciding what to do with all the money, you let me know. I can help you with that. ■



For more of Tom Blair's one-on-one interviews with San Diegans, go to sandiegomagazine.com/Dialogue.