

## **She works hard for the money**

Co-owner of two Tara Steak and Lobster House restaurants at 26, Tara Trevethan is a remarkable achiever

By Laura Nelson

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"I'm my father's daughter," says Tara Trevethan, co-owner of two restaurants that bear her name. But she makes it sound easy, as if that were possible. She's an intelligent, articulate, classy and, most importantly, down-to-earth young woman, who has known what her passion was since she was a young teen.

Trevethan and her three sisters were taught by their dad to be independent and self-sufficient. Whatever their passion, it was strongly suggested they attend school and work in their chosen careers — at the same time.

The founder of the Andre's Steak House franchise on Marco Island in 1998, started it as a family business, which included his wife, his wife's brother, Charlie Ducate, and eventually Trevethan — when she realized the restaurant business was her passion.

Trevethan began working in the field during high school, when she worked for Tom Blodgett at Kahuna. Her first position was bussing tables and serving customers and shortly thereafter, she was cooking and taking care of the books. At 16, Blodgett entrusted her to run the eatery while he was traveling.

"I excelled at it and I loved it right away," Trevethan says. It's ever changing and always challenging. I like that pace, to think on my feet. I thrive on it." That is obvious.

She attended Florida Gulf Coast University and continued her employment at Kahuna. At the same time, she joined her family at Andre's and took on any role that needed filling — server, hostess, bartender — "I'd wash windows if they were dirty," she said.

One area that Tara's father didn't want to be part of was the kitchen. He had no interest in it, so he told his daughter, "Go at it, kid." She acted as general manager and became proficient in each aspect of the business, including ordering and receiving and accounting. Her mother was and continues to be the comptroller for the restaurant.

Trevethan's universal involvement and knowledge led to earning her the title of president and chief operating officer — "They picked my name out of a hat," she jokes.

Nevertheless, attending school full-time and working at both restaurants became too much — at 18, Trevethan was working 80 hours a week — and she reluctantly quit Kahuna. She felt an obligation to Blodgett, who had given her such wonderful opportunities, but her loyalty to her family took precedence.

She graduated with a degree in hotel and restaurant management, combined with small business management. She says she earned her "master's degree" working at Andre's and now Tara.

What started as a typical "masculine steak house" transformed into a contemporary restaurant with a redeveloped menu. Tara's mother created several of the dishes, which included new appetizers, adding fresh seafood, and developing distinctive sauces and dressings.

"My mother is a fabulous cook, who never had formal training," Trevethan says, "but she's 100 percent Italian, so ... ." Trevethan's mother continues to perfect more recipes and does not allow them on the menu until she is completely satisfied with the ingredients.

Trevethan says they had to keep with the times and with the community of Marco Island, so the family parted ways with the Andre franchise corporation — "an amicable divorce" — and reopened as Tara Steak and Lobster House.

That was two years ago. The restaurant is celebrating eight successful years today, Aug. 24, from 5 to 9 p.m., with an open house for residents and local businesses. They will be serving Tara's mother's fabulous hors d'oeuvres recipes accompanied by Tara's signature wine selection, which is developed by Trevethan's fiancé, Tommy Burnett, the Tara lounge manager.

Success is attributed to never changing the concept of the restaurant, remaining consistent, while ensuring improvements that are suitable to the shifting times and desires of the customers.

Keeping up with design is important, too, and Tara's interior has been revamped in the last year, while maintaining the elegant and comfortable ambiance of the restaurant. A lobster display tank is being installed as well as a handmade, sophisticated hostess stand, where Trevethan is often seen greeting guests, which is uncommon in most restaurants.

Our motto is that it is "a dining experience" not just eating "a basket meal, in and out in 45 minutes. I feel like they're in my home when they come here, Trevethan says sincerely. "Nobody is a number or a dollar amount. It's about the people, not the check. We want every customer to leave smiling. Everyone can get clients to come in once, but it's our job to ensure return visits."

One way of doing this is by remembering names and faces. The Tara Steak and Lobster House staff also is trained in assessing people's personalities and pairing them with the server who will most enhance their dining experience. Trevethan encourages the servers by telling them, "It's your time to shine. We're not about egos here. We're only as good as the last meal served." In addition, the family wants to accommodate different budgets and appetites, so they never oversell their products. If customers only want appetizers, that's terrific — they can linger as long as they want. That's why the restaurant has a lighter fare menu — the same food as the standard menu, just smaller portions.

Every diner is treated equally. "Whether it's President Bush or Joe Smith, we're going to provide the same special experience," Trevethan says. Tara Steak and Lobster House doesn't "churn and burn," — choosing a fast-paced turnover to acquire as many checks as possible per night.

Trevethan continued the family tradition by opening a second restaurant, in Fort Lauderdale. A good customer who had faith in Tara's talent, Mike Oesterle told her, "Kid, bring me a business plan and I'll be your partner.

It's the first time Trevethan was gaining experience in building, architecture, brand-new décor, permitting — "the only education I lacked," she said. "I could do anything I ever wanted in this dream space."

The competition is tough. The other steak houses are large, well-known, successful chains. Trevethan is on the "Big Boys' turf" and she didn't have Dad as her "go-to guy" anymore.

However, she was, undoubtedly, triumphant.

Sadly, Tara's father wasn't at the opening; he passed away suddenly. In honor of him, Tara opened on her father's birthday, Oct. 8 of last year, then hosted the grand opening on her own birthday, Nov. 9.

Tara Steak and Lobster House, on Marco Island and in Ft. Lauderdale, each received Wine Spectator's Grand Award of Excellence this year. Trevethan's fiancé, Tommy Burnett, is the developer of the wine list and acts as lounge manager on Marco. She also credits Marco's General Manager, Marc Porto, with the ongoing accomplishments of the restaurant.

Trevethan says, "Dad taught us girls to work hard and about survival. You have to love what you're doing. The entire family is dedicated to "being a good family first and a successful business later."

"You make sacrifices but it's rewarding," Trevethan explains. "I signed on for life. I'm building this for my family — I love working with them! And if our customers leave smiling, then we've done our jobs."

Asked if she thought ahead to a third restaurant, Trevethan said, with a twinkle in her eye, "It's always in the back of my mind. Three is the magic number of restaurants to qualify for pricing discounts from vendors and insurance companies."

This may be true, but it's likely her energy, ambition and exuberance for the profession that is driving her.

Tara's father emphasized to her two things about her business: First, don't ever make hasty decisions, because outcome affects a lot of people. Second, always be able to look at yourself in the mirror — well, he had to be able to look in the mirror to shave — and know that personal values, beliefs and morals are not being compromised.

It's certain that Tara Trevethan looks magnificent in the mirror.

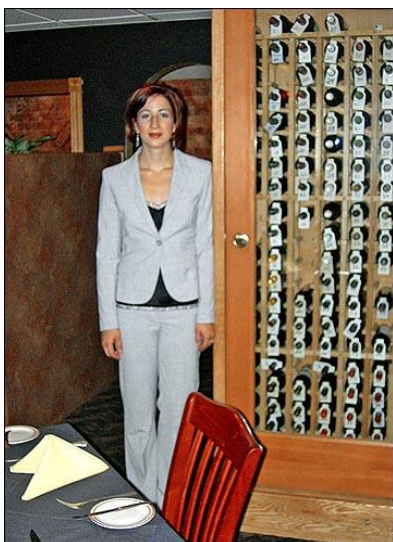
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Photo: Laura Nelson / Marco Eagle

(L) Tara stands in the lounge area of the Marco restaurant, where they have wine-tasting on Thursday and entertainment on Friday and Saturday nights.

(R) Tara and her sisters gave their father for his 60th birthday the sheet music to his favorite song, *My Way*, which they all signed. He always had it played as the last song at every family get-together — weddings, birthdays, anniversaries. On his headstone, it reads "I did it my way."



Tara Steak and Lobster House on Marco Island and in Ft. Lauderdale each won *Wine Spectator's* General Award of Excellence this year for their vast wine selection.