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Bill MacMillan

Helen Knight

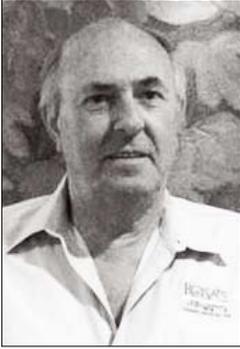
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Bill MacMillan

INTERVIEW WITH BILL MACMILLAN

Restaurant Owner

Bill MacMillan has been a resourceful entrepreneur throughout his life, from transporting groceries in his Radio Flyer, shooting pool, to starting restaurants. Bill grew up in Massachusetts. He worked as a cryptographer for NATO Headquarters in Paris, and when he returned to the States to work for the CIA, he met his soon-to-be wife Rosa, and his life took a dramatic turn. He currently resides in Pismo Beach, and together with his son Douglas he runs and co-owns Rosa's Ristorante Italiano.

Moebius: What is your culinary history?

BM: I had no culinary history. Then, I met my wife in Boston. She and her brother had just opened a coffee shop in Visalia, California, and she was back East vacationing and that's where I met her. Of course I fell in love, chased her back to California, and we were married three months later. The coffee shop wasn't doing too well, so they decided to open an Italian restaurant because they were Italian. So, I started working, making pizzas, tossing spaghetti, the whole thing. Before you knew it, I was cooking, running things, inventing dishes. I've been working in the restaurant for forty-one years now.

Moebius: So how did you get from Visalia to Pismo Beach?

BM: It was a normal sequence of events. My wife and I, and her brother and his wife worked together in Visalia. We went from Visalia, which was a small town at the time, to the next biggest city Bakersfield to start our own place.

Moebius: How did you get from Bakersfield to here?

BM: We just drove over. (*He laughs*) She decided. She was the driving force. I wasn't happy in Bakersfield, but I'd been happy in Visalia. I was comfortable working with her brother. But she was a pioneering spirit—ambitions. She was like that her whole life. The first few years in Bakersfield were hard; we didn't make much money, but then slowly it started to pick up. We were there for eighteen years. Then she decided she wanted to go to the coast. I said no; I didn't want to go. In Bakersfield the grass was green, the dogs were trained, the pool was clean. But she wanted to come, so we did. And we struggled again for three or four years, but it was the smartest thing we did.

We really stuck our neck way out coming here. We bought the property not knowing if we were going to make it or not. But she never lost faith; she had all the confidence in the world. She never had a negative thought in her brain. It has to be that way; otherwise people wouldn't take risks. That was in 1988.

Moebius: So what did you think of Pismo Beach when you first came?

BM: When we came to visit Pismo for the very first time around forty years ago, I hated it. It was all tank tops and motorcycles. The water was cold, and I never wanted to come back. But later there seemed to be some improvement, with new hotels and houses. There's been a steady improvement ever since. It's delightful now; it's like heaven. The new homes, wineries, golf. And the climate is of course divine.

Moebius: In today's marketplace, we see a proliferation of corporate restaurants. Family run businesses are no longer the standard of the day. How do you see Rosa's figuring in this environment?

BM: We've positioned ourselves to compete with the corporate economy of the future. Maybe we don't have the marketing, but in all other aspects we can compete. We're positioned to make changes to our menu, we can cut back if we need to, and we've positioned ourselves financially to withstand rough times. So, we can hold our own.

Moebius: During this recession, how do you see Rosa's and the restaurant industry on the Central Coast faring?

BM: Again, this is an economic time when businesses need to tighten up and produce a better product at a better price. So, in a way it's great because competition encourages efficiency and better products. But unfortunately, those who aren't doing their jobs well will fall by the wayside.

Moebius: You've received Pismo Beach Business of the Year twice now. What garnered that award for you?

BM: The first time was about ten years ago, and I think it had a lot to do with our progression: landscaping, painting, cleaning up the building, adding a patio. We improved the property, which is the center of attention when you drive into the city from the south. I think the city liked the fact that it looked good. And the restaurant was gaining rapidly in popularity at the time. And yes, that made us feel very good.

Getting it this time was even greater because there are more restaurants, more things going on. We have made some major renovations to the interior of the restaurant. We've always put money back into the business, and we've always been involved in community affairs and been generous in supporting local charities and events. We've been a big part of the community, and that plays a part in the award.

Moebius: "Rosa" isn't your wife's real name, is it?

BM: Aida is her real name. When she opened the first Italian restaurant with her brother, they named it after another sister living in Boston. So from the first day, she was called Rosa. The customers associated her with the name of the restaurant. And quite frankly, she would rather be called Rosa, or Mama Rosa. She liked it.

Moebius: She's been such a big part of everything. How are things now that she's gone?

BM: First of all, it's sad. As far as the restaurant goes, it is so big, there are so many employees, so many good people working here, that a few people won't affect the overall flow of the restaurant. But her, her personality, has been a big part of our success. And things will never be the same. If she were here now, I'm sure we would be much busier because she had such a big impact on the customers. There were people who came here just to see her; she was special. People who met her once said they would never forget her.

Moebius: How did Doug start working in the restaurant? You two seem to have a special relationship. What's it like working with your son?

BM: Doug was at USD, and he came home after his third year and decided that he didn't want to do it anymore. He wanted to work at the restaurant. In the kitchen, he was a sponge: he had one question after another all day long—he wanted to know every little thing. And it wasn't too long until he was better than anyone in there. It's been that way ever since. He cooked in northern Italy and he still learns. It's a learning process for all of us. Every day we are here learning new things.

We get along fine. When father and son work together like that you get to know each other's habits a little more, but that's just like anyone else you work with. As long as I let him be the boss, we never have a problem. I do want to commend myself for moving aside and letting a younger-thinking restaurateur employ his ideas. And sometimes it's hard because, sometimes, we older people like to hold on to our old ideas. Like, when he says we need new dinnerware, I think, what's wrong with the old set? But I must say, I was ready to move over. I've looked around and seen the pitfalls of other people when the older generations didn't let go or let in new ideas. A lot of Rosa's success wouldn't have happened without me moving over for Doug.

Moebius: Since our issue's theme is "food for thought," what's one gem you'd like to share with our readers?

BM: Well, the restaurant business has one of the highest death rates of any business. Two out of three restaurants fail. They claim that the restaurant business is the hardest to run. In our case, it has not been that way. It's a pleasure. It's been our social life. You can only do that if things are run well. Restaurants can kill you. What do you do if the cook doesn't show up one day? But the fact that we can do physical or mental work, or both, on any given day makes it wonderful. You can work on the computer or fix the ice machine. I wouldn't want to be locked into one or the other.

Moebius: So, there is a whole restaurant culture that you find really enjoyable?

BM: Yes, that's true. That's why I don't have to take nights off and go to Paris. This is good for me. ☺

Interview on behalf of Moebius conducted by Helen Knight, Winter 2009.