



Taste of Independence

Naples chef Ana Howe adds a measure of cheer and reward to each repast that she crafts.



Ana Howe believes that everyone has to learn how to survive and thrive—the easy way or the hard way. “It’s up to you,” shrugs the diminutive powerhouse whose trials and tribulations have made the owner of Here’s Howe Catering, all the more resilient, perceptive and compassionate.

One of Naples’ top caterers, she grew up in a stark cement row house in a low-income Rio de Janiero neighborhood, where local children played in alleyways between cookie-cutter flats. Her house had a cement floor, with no washer, television or refrigerator. Her mother walked for fresh groceries each day.

Despite the realities, her parents felt “rich” because they had Howe, their only child. Her father was a tailor and her mother was a couture seamstress. When Howe accompanied her mother to wealthy clients’ homes, she’d marvel at the cookies or other fine foods. “Even as a little girl, food was always appealing to me, always a comfort,” she recalls.

When Howe’s uncle moved to the United States, he beckoned them to follow. Her family packed their belongings and set out for Danbury, Conn. Howe’s father was quarantined until it could be ascertained that his lung scars were not tuberculosis, but remains from a trolley accident. Howe entered seventh grade at St. Mary’s Catholic School in Danbury, where she soon learned English, thanks to patient nuns. The family settled in a nice home in a Portuguese neighborhood with ethnic bakeries, grocery stores and clubs. Terrified for Howe’s safety and purity, her parents wouldn’t let her venture out alone. They kept her sheltered, never allowing her to attend parties or proms throughout high school.

ANA HOWE, OWNER OF HERE’S HOWE CATERING, COOKS IN AN INDUSTRIAL KITCHEN ON RAIL HEAD BOULEVARD.

CREDIT: PHOTO BY JENNIFER ZIEGELMAIER | HAIR BY SANDI DARLING, RUNNING WITH SCISSORS | MAKEUP BY LAURA DANZER

In 1965, Howe and her parents visited Portugal, supposedly to meet her father’s family. Instead, they were planning her arranged marriage to Antonio, 11 years older and her mother’s second cousin. Though he was a stranger who she didn’t find attractive, Howe obeyed her parents. She finished high school in the States and returned to Portugal at age 18 to marry “Tony,” enabling him to come to America (his plan all along).

Fifteen years later, Howe was a content wife with three children—Laura, Christina and Antonio, Jr., who had muscular dystrophy. Until one day, her grandmother Leopoldina told her that Tony was cheating on her with the housekeeper they had brought over from Portugal.

While Howe’s mother dismissed it, saying that infidelity was normal and wives should bear it, Howe couldn’t overlook Tony’s transgressions. Unfortunately, she didn’t know that leaving the house in the heat of the moment would jeopardize her custody rights for the children. Saying that Howe had abandoned the children, the judge awarded custody to Tony.

Working as a salad girl in the executive dining room of the Vicks Vaporub Co., her bosses saw something in her, and sent her to the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y.

“I got my children back after two years,” Howe says. “I also got promoted to Reader’s Digest. I was the chef responsible for the owners’ mansion in Hyde Park.” There, she prepared gourmet meals for Henry Kissinger, Joan Lunden, Barbara Walters and Jackie Kennedy. When the owners moved to Manhattan, Howe declined to follow because she didn’t want to uproot her family. A former colleague told Howe about Naples.

“It was 1992 when I brought my son and my widowed father here to paradise,” smiles

Howe. “My son loved it here,” she recalls, eyes brimming. But one day, her son got sick. “I’m scared, mommy,” he whispered, as they drove to the emergency room. He was gone an hour later. Muscular dystrophy attacks muscles, and that vital muscle, the heart, had given out. Antonio was

“Never let them see you sweat.”

considered a miracle because he had lived to be 32—a

decade beyond the expected lifespan.

While serving at a local country club, “I heard Antonio’s (her son) favorite song being played. I started to cry. My boss said, ‘You need to get it together. It’s been six months.’ I picked up my purse and never went back,” she says. “That’s when I started my own catering business (Here’s Howe Catering). That man didn’t realize you *never* get over it.”

Ever since, Howe has amassed an endless repertoire of succulent recipes which she prepares for intimate parties of two or soirees for more than 1,000. Her flan recipe is a closely-guarded secret, as are several other specialties requested over and over. “Never let them see you sweat,” she cautions, remembering the time a bride and groom were being wed in a garden while their dog was on the kitchen table, eating their wedding cake. Belying years of hardship, she prepares her dishes with enthusiasm and cheer because she loves what she does—and appreciates life’s giant triumphs and simple pleasures. ☺

Lois Sabatino is a consultant in public relations, community relations, special events, fundraising and motivational training. She was the first female executive at United Technologies.

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