

They Feed Others From the Overflow of Kinship

Foodmakers Live Traditions, Ventures

By PAUL HUGHES

Family-owned food enterprises naturally have a special something in their recipes.

Many people go into entrepreneurship from a proactive pursuit of interests or opportunities, or simply what looked good in the college catalog. But fathers and mothers, sons and daughters, and grandparents get involved in family-owned efforts in reverse. They're more likely drawn by something in the blood, desires not quite explainable, and what ultimately seems inevitable.

"This was a legacy for my husband," said **Gretchen Shoemaker**, the matriarch whose vision and money launched soul-food specialist **Georgia's Restaurant** in 2014 at the Anaheim Packing House.

Daughter **Nika Shoemaker-Machado** handles community relations, and son-in-law **Marlon Machado** is chief executive.

Georgia's—ribs and chicken, tri-tip and catfish, jambalaya and pulled pork—honors Shoemaker's late husband, **George**, whose back-in-the-day help with her catering provided inspiration, and lifetime of work and saving gave \$170,000 to start it.

There's no "Georgia" behind the name; its family ties go deeper, Nika said, starting with George and adding one letter from each of his three daughters' names.

Georgia's was "profitable since day one," said Marlon, annual growth rates averaging 15% to about \$1.8 million last year, from just 1,100 square feet.

He wrote a meticulous business plan before launch.

"We hit our six-month projections in a month and half" after opening, he said.

The family is negotiating to open its second Georgia's in Long Beach at LBX, for Long Beach Exchange, a 266,000-square-foot retail



Georgia's on their mind: CEO and son-in-law of restaurant's owner, Marlon Machado, co-owner Gretchen Shoemaker, and her daughter, Nika Shoemaker-Machado at Anaheim soul-food eatery

and dining layout by Newport Beach-based **Burnham USA Equities Inc.** at Douglas Park, a master plan by Irvine-based **Sares-Regis Group**.

So far not a bad paean to papa George.

Breaking Bread

Other enterprises draw from similar stories.

Jonnie LoFranco, owner of Santa Ana-based **Bread Artisan Bakery Inc.**, said she has felt the presence of her late father, **Robert Peckham**, while she works. She got involved 10 years ago at **Breads and Spreads**, which he founded in 1995.

Her father's "bread made by hand" was popular, but his death in 2001 started a downhill slide. She'd come in to see if the venture could be saved, but the family closed it down.

"There was no good bread here," LoFranco said.

What's good is "true, hearty, crusty, European-style artisan bread," she said, clearly ready to say more if asked. A whole-grain foundation is just the starter. In fact, it's best if you get an

authentic baker and if you go to France to find one.

LoFranco's baker is **Yannick Guegan** from the Brittany region, who's also a partner in the business.

Bread employs about 60 and occupies 11,000 square feet between two buildings, about three-fourths of it to bake 30,000 to 40,000 items a day. A factory tour reveals a dozen kinds in one part of the process or another. The offices bear no sign, in order to prevent passersby from barging in for brioche.

Clients include **Disneyland Resort**, **Nick's Restaurants** in Irvine, and high-end hotels—**Montage**, **Pelican Hill**, **Paséa**, **Monarch Beach**, and the new **Lido House** on Balboa, for which she's baking squid-ink rolls.

The Business Journal estimates Bread's annual revenue at about \$5 million.

Secret Sauce

Data seems to show family businesses that continue in the same field through generations tend to be successful. The Wall Street Journal



The little bears: Dave, Fran, Karen and John Ursini and Laura Ursini-Marroquin at family business' Costa Mesa restaurant, Newport Rib Co.

reported last month on a study showing businesses begun by sons in the same field their fathers worked in widely outperformed all other entrepreneurial efforts by offspring.

Meet the Ursinis.

John and **Dave** co-own **Newport Rib Co.** in Costa Mesa and **Naples Rib Co.** in Long Beach, which their father, **Fran**, founded in 1984, and still works at every day, John said.

"One of his first nights off was his 25th wedding anniversary" with wife, **Karen**, said John and Dave's sister, **Laura Ursini-Marroquin**, who handles marketing, community relations and catering.

Fran had experience owning a beachside 1960s hamburger stand, and Tony Roma's was then the only rib game in town, so the family's homemade sauce slathered on meat seemed like a good shot.

Dave said, "It's sweet enough and spicy enough"—a reporter's taste test confirms this—and built off of an Eastern Carolina-style vinegar base.

The family started in Costa Mesa and moved to a former Sizzler site there in 1999 after adding Long Beach in 1992. The siblings own the real estate.

The Business Journal estimates company revenue at \$5 million to \$10 million a year.

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Family First

At a Tuesday morning “board meeting” at “corporate”—John’s joke on the Harbor Boulevard location—the Ursinis—the name is Italian for “little bear”—are like a family.

They talk all at once, finish each other’s sentences, and pause only for the big stuff: tributes to Fran and Karen; championing charities, such as youth sports; or the annual 20 Days of Charity, when their diners can choose among 35 charities to donate 20% of their checks to in the first three weeks of November.

The company also caters an annual picnic for 3,000 staffers at the **University of California-**

Irvine.

The Georgia’s trio laugh, recalling George and Gretchen preparing catering jobs in the early-morning darkness.

“He’d get up with me, put the coffee on, chop vegetables,” Gretchen said.

Except when it was their song—or songs.

“Lou Rawls, the Temptations, Teddy Pendergrass,” Nika said. “They’d be dancing and singing.”

Back Door

The things family businesses are known for is often just the start. Both restaurants cater and



Which would you like?: Santa Ana artisan bread maker Jonnie LoFranco at benefit for The Ecology Center

offer delivery.

“Fifty-five percent of our revenue goes out the back door,” said John Ursini. Common choices are party packs of ribs, chicken and coleslaw—which devotees say is even better the second day.

Georgia’s has catered for **Vans** and **Expedia** in the Packing House’s events space, Cook’s

Chapel. LoFranco has considered expanding into retail—“love food, love shopping”—but

growth measured and sifted like flour has been her focus, and she’s content to have done 30 pop-ups for, among others, **The Ecology Center** in San Juan Capistrano.

All three enterprises run delivery vans. On a recent Tuesday morning, one of Bread’s trucks was at **North Italia** at Park Place in Irvine, and the previous Saturday a Georgia’s van was headed north on the (I-5) Freeway.

The Newport-Naples barbecue spots’ vans sport photos of John’s twin boys and one of Dave’s daughters—as babies splattered with barbecue sauce.

“Our wives took some ribs and let them mess around,” John said. “After we stopped laughing, [we had a] marketing strategy.”

The boys are now 19, the girl 20. Fran and Karen have eight grandkids, ages 15 to 22, several of whom work in the restaurants. ■