

The Coffeehouse Years

Partnership

We were five: a mother/daughter combo, a wife with young children, a single woman, and a single mom(me). The others heard me perform and thought I might be interested in joining them to start a weekend place where everybody could feel comfortable hanging out: couples, sure, but people spending the evening alone as well, and families who wanted to bring their kids along. Hastings-on-Hudson, where we lived, like a large part of Westchester County tended to cater to couples on weekend dates. I was indeed interested, and we set out to find a place to start our coffeehouse.

We found a perfect place, a vacant bar that was pretty run-down but had the "bones": comfortable back room, large kitchen, and a front room with patterned tin ceiling and gleaming mahogany bar complete with brass rail and mirrored back. It was located at the end of an out-of-the-way street, which wasn't really a factor until I took sole ownership and added a restaurant. (You may be familiar with the old adage that there are three things vital to a restaurant's success: location, location, location. It's true.) We signed a lease and set to work hammering, sawing, polishing, cleaning, carting; eager to get started. The landlord was a man of his time. He would come around once in a while chomping a cigar and saying stuff like: "you girls have husbands who let you do this thing, huh?" After a while he started bringing buddies with him to proudly show the place, and us, off.

We opened with much local excitement, and did well from the start. The coffeehouse was named after one of my songs, "Fair Harbor" (no relation to the Fire Island town of that name). I felt honored by that choice. Responsibilities were divided in such a way as to minimize conflict. One woman handled the books, another took charge of the kitchen, another did publicity, a fourth dealt with supplies, and naturally I handled bookings. If there's anything that spreads more quickly than wildfire, it's news to musicians that somewhere a possible venue has sprung up. Once in a while I booked myself in, and the rest of the time I worked to keep the talent varied and the level high. We served coffee, tea and homemade pastries and were open weekend nights only. Since all our work was voluntary, money brought in by admissions and refreshments was sufficient. Of course we paid our performers a percentage of the gate.

We were a pretty strong-minded bunch, and I'm sure we had our clashes; the only one I remember these many years later involved, of all things, artificial sweetener. One evening I arrived and discovered that none of the tables had the little packets of Sweet 'n Low that were usually there. I asked about this, and the others said it wasn't healthy for people and they decided to remove it. I was a user; this annoyed me. I walked around removing all the ashtrays from the tables. (This was the late 70's, folks.) Several of my colleagues smoked, and they asked me what I was doing. I said smoking wasn't good for people and.....The next night Sweet 'n Low was back, along with the ashtrays. (I guess I should add that memory can be unreliable: it's possible I had a screaming fit before I removed the ashtrays. I don't recall.)

I would have been happy to continue this pleasant weekend activity for the foreseeable future, but my partners grew weary after a year and a half. We talked about selling the business, as a coffeehouse or whatever a buyer wanted to do with it. I thought long and hard: should I take a chance and run it as sole proprietor? It was clear that if I did I would need to add food in order to make a living, since I'd have to quit my part-time social work job. Huge numbers of people, friends, customers, even strangers, confided that they'd always dreamed of owning a coffeehouse. Everyone urged me to do it, except my partners who hoped to make a profit by selling, whereas I would only be able to offer them their modest initial investment--and that much only because my mother was willing to help me financially if I went ahead with it.

Time went by and we hadn't had any offers for the business. The others were about to accept my decision to take over when at the last minute a tentative offer came along. They were very happy, since it would have yielded them each more money, although the space between an initial offer and an actual transaction is very wide. I became a pariah to them because we would all have to agree to the sale, and I refused. It was far from easy for me. I've always been very timid about antagonizing people and have a hard time dealing with anger. In this instance, though, I persevered; I had made up my mind to fulfill my own, and apparently half the developed world's, dreams of coffeehouse ownership. Most of my partners never spoke to me again, and it hurt. A lot. Still, I paid them what they'd put in and we parted ways. Ironically, they would have greatly enjoyed being regular customers at Fair Harbor in the following years, but of course they never came.

On-The-Job Learning

Statistic I may or may not have known: 90%, or is it 95%, of restaurants fail within the first two years.

I plunged into preparations to open as a restaurant and coffeehouse. I hired a local chef to prepare the food, interviewed people to wait tables and handle other chores, and tried to work out a casual menu, which didn't turn out that way because Diana, a caterer whom I knew and wanted as chef, specialized in French cuisine. However, we devised dishes that could be frozen between Sunday night when we closed and Wednesday night when we reopened.

Opening night was a disaster. People poured in and I was simply unprepared for the turnout. The way we'd set up the food--trays on the counter in the front room, people helping themselves and carrying their plates into the back--didn't work, with lack of fresh trays ready when the food ran out, wait persons scurrying back and forth and forgetting silverware, just a totally amateur event. My pride and sense that I could handle a simple setup took quite a beating that night. However, people were very forgiving, and came back and sort of helped us figure out how to do things. Gradually the food service fell more or less into place. The entertainment aspect went smoothly from the start. I always paid the performers, with a modest but guaranteed minimum no matter how small the audience might turn out to be. I paid the performers, I paid the staff, I paid the suppliers, the utilities, the landlord, I paid everyone except, of course, myself. The owner is always at the bottom of the food chain.

It was a mosaic of experiences; I'll tell you some of the highlights, and a few lowlights, of Fair Harbor's existence. (If you happen to have been a patron of Fair Harbor Coffeehouse in Hastings-on-Hudson in the late 1970's, do email me. I'd love to hear from you. Who needs Facebook?)

Fair Harbor was located next to railroad tracks used by the trains that traveled between Manhattan and the Hudson Valley. The sound of a train was frequently audible inside. One evening, two men entered and ordered beer. (We had a wine and beer license. Had to, in order to survive financially, but they went well with the atmosphere, and I had a great time trying out various wines in order to choose our house wine.) They said they'd often wondered about the place when passing by. It turned out they were a train conductor and engineer, had parked the train for a few minutes, gotten off, and crossed over to check us out. We chatted for a few minutes and then they had to get back to work--passengers were waiting-- so they said goodbye.

Without a wine and beer license, I couldn't have survived very long. I didn't apply for liquor, even though that would have been a real money-maker, because it would have created a very different atmosphere and because everyone knows folkies don't drink much and, as an acquaintance once explained, they don't spend much. True. Because they generally don't have much. Actually, our clientele was fairly upscale, as is much of Westchester County. Anyhow, one day a little fellow entered with a tape measure and started measuring the backs of the booths in the dining area. He was from the State Liquor Authority. If the bench backs had been two inches lower I would have had to have new ones installed, because the rules for establishments that served spirits called for a certain height to the bench backs. Maybe they were afraid a child might look over the back of a bench and see someone at an adjoining table drinking. Who knows?

Once a month we had Open Mike. Performers were limited to ten minutes apiece or three songs. Audiences were very kind on those nights, and applauded even mediocre acts. One night a comedian showed up and started his routine. On and on he went. People laughed politely at appropriate times, but he wasn't making a huge impression. After about twelve minutes, and after he ignored a few meaningful gestures from me, I gently said that he needed to finish up. "I'm gonna stay here until the cows come home", he snarled, whereupon the previously docile audience began to moo in unison. That was funnier than any of his jokes.

Every few weeks a man who said he lived in town came in and ordered beer or wine while a performance was going on in the back room. He would start to ruminate about "that Commie, Pete Seeger" and commie folk singers who played in places like this. He'd work himself into a fury listening to his own spiel, and said some threatening things about bringing a gun and shooting whoever was spewing them Commie lyrics in the back room. I was a little worried about him, but he would calm down eventually and leave, still muttering threats to Pete and the others. After he'd shown up about a half-dozen times he came in one night, and over a glass of wine began to talk about his messed-up life, how this place was nice, how lonely he was. I just listened; I'd heard it before across that beautiful mahogany counter. Eventually he ventured into the back room and after a while he became a regular. (I

don't know whether my inner therapist was subliminally soothing him, or what, but apparently the coffeehouse vibe drew him in over time.)

Food Stories

Among the regulars who started coming right from the beginning was a very thin woman who loved the friendly atmosphere. She always dressed beautifully. Her last name suggested she might be an heiress--I never asked-- but she seemed lonely. I needed more waitstaff and asked her if she'd like to work for us. She went to work enthusiastically, zooming from table to table pestering customers to order more food, order dessert, order, order, "are you sure you aren't still hungry?" People started complaining. It slowly dawned on me that she was anorexic and had the fixation on food that anorectic people often have. I had to let her go. Firing people was another task I found very hard, but I had to learn to do it from time to time, and not apologize repeatedly.

The chef, Diana, was a marvel of speed and efficiency. I hated her because she was a size two. Her elegant dishes clashed with the casual atmosphere, but believe me, nobody complained. (Cooking was the only thing I didn't do in the course of running Fair Harbor, except for black bean soup. I liked coming to the quiet kitchen on a weekday while the kids were in school, assembling the ingredients, stirring the thick liquid in the huge pots, adding a little wine--sampling it first, naturally--and hauling the soup into the freezer.) She spent two or three evenings preparing the weekend dishes: Swedish meatballs with cranberry sauce; breast of guinea hen in calvados with wild rice (I told you she was elegant); ratatouille, etc. etc., while her young sons did homework at the big table in the center of the kitchen. When it was time for their dinner, she had to send out for hamburgers and french fries, since they wouldn't eat any of that other stuff.

I understood totally. When there were entrees that wouldn't keep well in the freezer until the following week, I would take home leftovers. Many a night we sat at the table at home while the conversation went something like this: kids--"Mom, do we have to eat guinea hen in calvados with wild rice again? Why can't we have pizza?" Me-- "Be quiet and eat your dinner. Children are starving in the Bronx, and we can't afford pizza anyhow."

The Dishwasher From H---

Jacques appeared in response to an ad I placed in the town newspaper. He explained that he had graduated from Harvard and was taking time off to explore possibilities. He needed to earn some money in the meantime. At first he was fine, arriving with Fortune Magazine tucked under his arm, toiling away at the dishes and singing cheerfully. I had to remind him several times not to eat the guinea hen, which for economic reasons was off limits to the staff. I soon began to notice that diners were waiting longer for service. I would enter the kitchen and find Jacques holding forth on some topic, surrounded by fascinated staff. I began to feel like a mean person for dragging people away from his orbit. Jacques

managed to charm me again and again into giving him another chance, but the same thing would start after a few days. I finally had to fire him. I sometimes wonder what became of him. Probably he's a CEO of some company, or a professional con man. Or both.

One night we opened in a terrible blizzard. None of us expected anyone to show up, since driving was nearly impossible. It was a week night, and at least no performance had been scheduled. The few staff members who made it in were sitting around eating desserts, and I was trying to keep my mind off the financial fallout from a wasted night, when the door opened and a figure appeared dramatically amid the swirling snowflakes. A frequent customer had decided to cross-country ski into town and come to Fair Harbor for dinner. We fed him very well that night.

Time to Move On

I have many wonderful memories of Fair Harbor. Some of them are far more wonderful in retrospect than they were at the time--like the night a bluegrass band was playing and the town lost electricity and lots of people came down to hear the music while we lit candles, served free beer before it got warm, and I worried about the possible loss of all the food in the freezer. Or the time a nasty couple complained about the food, the service, the music, the chairs, the location, everything, and I had the pleasure of ringing up their payment at the end and telling them politely to please never come again. Of course there are memories of the performers who came through, the terrific customers that supported us, the people who worked there, the chocolate cake that people called to reserve ahead of time: so many memories.

When I decided to close I felt both relief and sorrow. It was time to get back to earning decent money, and to get back to performing, since I seldom performed at my own place--too distracted by keeping one eye on whether the service was going smoothly, etc. (It was also time to lose the thirty-some pounds I gained from standing at the counter behind our fabulous desserts. I still maintain that all those calories leached into me because I stood so close to them.) It was ironic that fulfilling this dream interfered for a time with the other dream of writing and singing my own songs. I know absolutely that if I hadn't had my coffeehouse I would have wondered for the rest of my life whether I should have gone for it.

There was a lovely bookstore across the street, which Frank Scoscia--a frequent customer and truly a rare angel of kindness on earth-- had opened, partly because the coffeehouse was its neighbor. I was browsing there one afternoon, telling him I had decided to close, and he asked if I'd like to run a series of concerts at the bookstore. I replied that I'd love to but that I couldn't risk any more money. A man browsing nearby heard this, walked up to me, and said: "Would you like a grant? I'll give you a grant". And that, reader, is how I got a grant from the Haydn Foundation to produce a concert series at the bookstore. As I liked to tell some of my friends who were struggling with writing grant proposals, "It's easy to get a grant: just talk about it in a bookstore!"