

The Stuff that Dreams are Made Of

By Su-Jit Lin
Photos by Jonathan Bachman

An understated entrance in busy Fat City belies the modern décor and spacious establishment hidden behind dated red brick walls; the serpentine line of people crowded out those doors and through the parking lot served as only one indication of the treasure housed in such a humble facade. It's not immediately apparent that the many-storied gray building is connected, but once indoors, the entire atmosphere changes as the size of the beautifully renovated restaurant is revealed. It's a sensory overload. Look at the lobster tanks! The professional oyster shuckers behind the bar! Get hypnotized by the huge flames leaping through the air, dancing in joyous abandon as they carry on doing what made Drago's famous—charbroiling oysters.

I wasn't given too much time, though, to absorb my surroundings. It was only a moment before I was approached by the matriarch of the Drago's empire—a woman of grandmotherly solidness you'd hug if she weren't so meticulously dressed and well-accessorized; a lovely oyster with a perfect pearl hung around her neck. "I'm Klara. Do you want coffee, or maybe lunch? Some charbroiled oysters?" she asked in a lovely lilting accent. "Tommy will be here soon."

Tommy, the son who now runs the operations founded by his parents, Drago and Klara Cvitanovich, did indeed arrive soon. A tall man of powerful build, Tommy strode in authoritatively and self-assuredly, instantly recognizable by a charismatic and attention-grabbing aura. This was a man who was sure of himself. Drago himself followed, a bit more reservedly and with a cautious step. He greeted me with old world courtesy in a soft voice as kindly as his smile.

The Cvitanoviches, an immigrant family with roots in Croatia and ties in British Columbia, then sat down to tell me their story—the one of the American dream.

Where Y'at: Let's talk first about where this restaurant concept came from. There was another Drago's out here years ago, predating this one. What are the differences between the one on Harrison Avenue and this one?

Klara Cvitanovich: It was owned by my husband's sister and her husband, Drago. Drago is a common Croatia name, but it gets mixed up with Italian because in Italian, it's a last name. Ours used to be Lakeside Seafood, but after the first one closed, it became Drago's. But some people still call it Lakeside Seafood, and that's okay.

WYAT: What similarities remain?

Tommy Cvitanovich: They were both seafood, neighborhood type[s] of restaurants; an old style New Orleans restaurant... [ours] is more a hybrid of ideas, more modern.



Klara and Drago Cvitanovich

WYAT: And *new* ideas. Tell me about your inspiration for the charbroiled oyster, the now quintessential dish that was named 'New Orleans' Best Single Bite.'

TC: We used to do a dish with redfish and drumfish with the scales. We basted it with butter, garlic, and when asked to describe it, we'd say that the skin and scales keep the flavor in. So we wondered, 'what if the oyster water was kept in?' The shell holds all the natural juices, and the smoke and fire give it a smoky taste. It was a lucky idea.

KC: At that time, there were a few deaths in the U.S. from Gulf oysters in rare cases, and the popularity of raw oysters dropped off. Cooking it was better, people thought.

WYAT: The charbroiled oyster came from Tommy...but what about your other recipes?

KC: We had a little Creole lady named Ruth, who worked for us from when we opened to the day she died. Her grandson works here today, and they are family. Our gumbo is her recipe and we have not changed it. It is Mama Ruth's gumbo, and made exactly the same.

TC: I think, 'how do I Drago-tize it?' when I see something I enjoy somewhere else.

WYAT: So the process remains personal. Klara, you wear your oyster; Tommy, you've got Drago lobster cufflinks. Y'all seem emotionally invested in the restaurant, still.

KC: It's my American dream. I like to get e-mail, because there are hardly any complaints. I love to read the e-mails ... it makes me feel great. Out of hundreds of e-mails, there [are] almost never any complaints.

TC: I answer those personally.

KC: It is all very hard work, and not fun, but it paid off. I have two sons that contribute so much, my Tommy and Jerry. Jerry is a doctor, and was an emergency room physician, and he works at urgent care clinics. My kids did their homework in the Ford Club Wagon while there was light. They turned out okay, and they work hard.

WYAT: Well, I'll say.

TC: A lot of kids did Little League, but I didn't. This was my Little League. In high school and college, I came back and waited tables, so I guess I took the Drew Brees restaurant path, from Little League to the professional level, working my way up.

WYAT: Had you ever thought about doing anything else?

TC: Of course; my mind's always spinning. But I did always go into nice, big restaurants and go, 'Wow, it'd be cool if we did this or that;' but we didn't have the money or something happened.

WYAT: This family is completely self-made, from when Mr. Drago used to shuck oysters at the Acme House to when Tommy had to peel shrimp

and Ms. Klara did the books at night. What's one of the best feelings about being an established New Orleans restaurant and having made culinary history by inventing an iconic dish?

TC: The neatest thing is when restaurateurs that I really respect call me for advice. I'll share, like with Greg Reggio [one of the Taste Buds], whatever I can. Not the recipes (*chuckles*), but I'll always help.

WYAT: Speaking of helping, the Drago's family does a whole lot of that.

TC: It's so important to give back to the community. After Gustav and Ike, we gave away thousands of meals. We do about 600-800 steak dinners for Thanksgiving—not the normal tired turkey—and have done it for four years. We opened on a Sunday for a cancer event and donated food, labor and raised \$50,000 for a needy family. We served oysters for a family stricken with cancer and raised \$3,300 towards \$25,000. We want to be remembered as the restaurant [that] gave back.

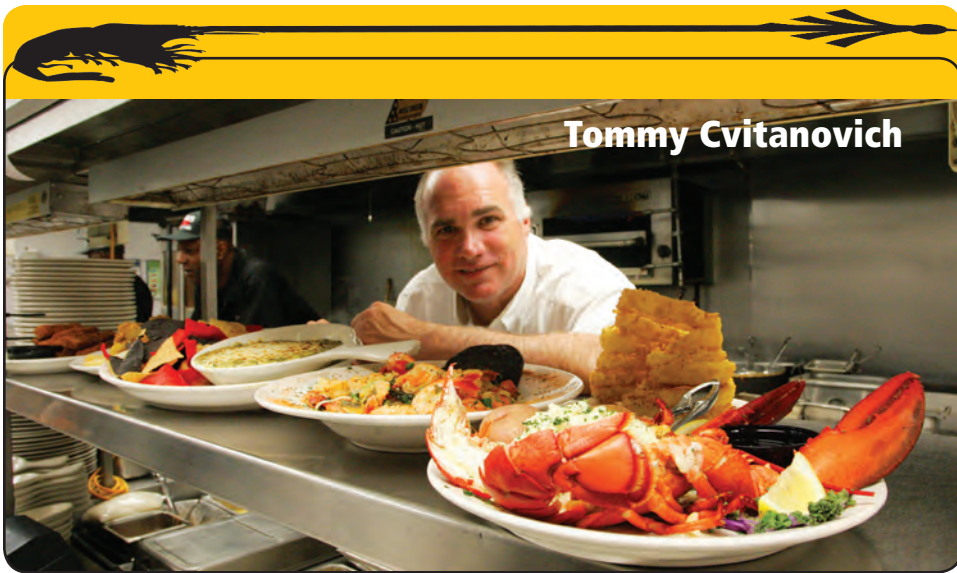
KC: We gave away 78,000 free meals after Katrina because the people needed it.

WYAT: I notice your wife called a few times ...

TC: The house is filled with kids right now.

KC: They all call it the C-House.

TC: I love being the community family house, having parties... Mardi Gras, I took out five kids, and I got to work, got dinner, saw the parade, then went back to work.



Tommy Cvitanovich

WYAT: Don't you ever feel stretched thin?

TC: Sometimes. Taste of the Town is coming up, and the Zurich Classic, [both of] which I'm really involved in. We're [also] getting into the planning stages of the Seafood Festival in September. I try not to let the restaurant suffer, but it all works out. I love being active in the industry. I'm a part of a select group of restaurateurs involved in the Board of Health Pelican program. I worked with DHH with designing the site and now with a reporting mechanism for the Board of Health Reviews, to help it be informative to the public but fair to the restaurants.

WYAT: How do you plan to keep business up in this economy?

TC: Like all restaurants, we've experienced a downturn, but not a lot. We're just going to keep doing what we're doing. We're going to focus on making sure we don't waste anything.

WYAT: How about prix fixe menus? That's becoming common as people tighten their purse strings.

TC: No, we plan on running our regular everyday menu. I hope we don't have to make changes ...

WYAT: And start screwing with tradition?

TC: Well, yeah! It's all about consistency in every way. When people tell other people to come here because something was really, really good, I want it to taste, look, and be garnished the same. I want it to be the same exact experience.

WYAT: So y'all don't do a seasonal menu?

TC: After a few months, some people come back, and if they had something so good before and it's not on the menu, then they're disappointed. Consistency is the most important thing to us.

KC: And we serve everything fresh.

WYAT: Fresh ingredients are really important, huh? All those oysters being shucked back there—it doesn't get fresher than that.

TC: Our lifeline is our locals. 75-80% of our [clientele] even at the Hilton are locals. Locals have very discriminating tastes and we need them to come back. We focus on keeping it all affordable, to keep customers satisfied with good quality food at a reasonable price.

WYAT: You talk about your customers with a whole lot of respect, and about your local following with a grateful fervor.

KC: It's like a family. Most people [that] come in, they know me, know Tommy.

TC: My most important job is table service, just stopping by and checking in and getting feedback. This spring, we're [putting] some stuff up and [taking] some stuff down. I have a great Mediterranean Crabmeat Salad; I'll put it up against anyone. We're rolling out a new shrimp salad and it's delicious. We don't change the menu often, but we'll add a few items once a year or so. Like I said, if people recommend something, I want them to have it the same way when they come back.

WYAT: Now that we're on food, what are your favorite specials for the spring?

TC: Soft-shell crab in the late spring. Our stuffed soft-shell is the best-selling non-menu item. It's cut in quarters, with the stuffing on the plate first and covered in a seafood cream sauce with all of the legs up and all over the place. And of course, our oysters and lobsters, which are served year-round.

WYAT: As the oyster experts, what's your favorite way to eat an oyster?

KC: Charbroiled and Oysters Herradura, which is deglazed with tequila, onions, pine nuts, and sun-dried tomatoes.

TC: Two ways – oysters brochette with Jack Daniels glaze and horseradish sauce, and charbroiled. Also raw oysters with caviar, cream cheese, red onion – that's great, too, though it's not on the menu.

WYAT: Do you foresee adding it?

TC: Maybe as a special. I'll call it Oysters Leanne, for my wife. She has really rich taste; likes the finer things.

WYAT: Again, family bonds and emotional ties come into play. So how do the Cvitanoviches view their restaurant?

Both: American dream.

KC: I came here, had a small restaurant. I am living the dream. I live the American dream to the fullest.

TC: This is living the American dream.

Now that may very well be the dream of Drago, Klara, and Tommy of Drago's, but the stuff my dreams are made of is the heavenly scent, rich flavor, and exquisite texture of their charbroiled oysters... that I later came back during dinner service to get a second helping of. So to each their own. Let's just be grateful that Drago and Klara Cvitanovich had a dream and shared it with the world.

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