

# Three generations of a San Francisco family thrived running popular oceanside eatery overlooking Sutro Baths

## Description

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It was, you might say, the last breakfast. On a summer Saturday in 2020, dozens of family members, employees, customers, and friends got together for one last meal at a restaurant that had survived under the ownership of a single family for more than 80 years.

Louisâ?? Restaurant, perched on a cliff above Sutro Baths on Point Lobos Avenue, was closing. It was a victim of the pandemic and the governorâ??s order to shutter restaurants throughout the state. Although youâ??d think it would have been a melancholy meal, it wasnâ??t.



Bill Hontales looks out toward the Pacific Ocean from a narrow balcony along the building that once housed Louisâ?? Restaurant. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Tom Hontalas, who owned the popular eatery along with his older brother, Bill, was cooking the kinds of breakfasts generations of San Franciscans and tourists had come to enjoy,  along with the iconic view of the Pacific Ocean: pancakes, sausage, bacon, and scrambled eggs. His wife, Patty, whose friendship with the Hontalas family started in grade school, was there to help.

## A joyful â??wakeâ??

â??There were no tears. It was a celebration. But it was strange knowing it was the last time weâ??d eat there and that there was, for once, plenty of parking,â?• she said. Generations of the family attended: brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, grandchildren, and a great-grandchild.

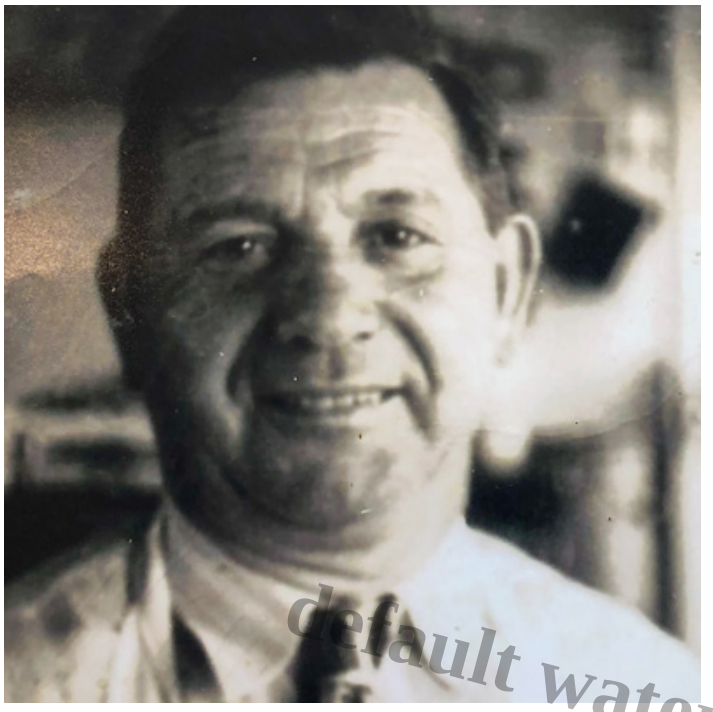



The restaurant opened in 1937. it was named after its founder, Louis Hontales (below) and run by his wife, Helen (above), after he became ill. (Photo courtesy of Tom Hontales)

Louisâ?? was the cement that held a family together for three generations. Over the decades, the 55-seat eatery provided jobs for uncounted platoons of workers, many drawn from the Sunset neighborhood where the Hontalas family lived. Running a restaurant is hard work, but it provided a solid living for the family at a time when working-class San Franciscans could own homes and start businesses.

Four years after Louisâ?? closed, there are no plans to revive it, the brothers who last ran it are thriving, but sadly, the building that housed it is a dilapidated graffiti magnet.

It opened on Valentineâ??s Day 1937, founded by Louis Hontalas, who had immigrated from Greece earlier that century. Ownership was passed down from Louis and his wife to his son James and then to his sons, Tom and Bill.




The steep street on the western edge of the city was once home to at least three restaurants owned by Greek immigrants, including the nearby Cliff House, owned by cousins of the Hontalas family. All are now closed, though the Cliff House is expected to reopen in 2025.

Louisâ?? was always a family business. When Louis became ill, his wife, Helen took over and worked there for decades.

â??It was the only job I ever had,â?• said Bill Hontalas, now 68. He began working there when he was 10. â??First day of work in 1967, I worked five hours and when my dad got home, he gave me $2.50,â?• he recalled during a chat in his Parkside District home.

Tom Hontalas posted a bittersweet goodbye on the restaurantâ??s Facebook page after Louisâ?? closed. â??Said my goodbyes this morning to my home away from home, the only job I ever had. I spent 52 years working at Louisâ??, I owe everything that I have to this restaurant,â?• he wrote.

## Loved by locals

The restaurant was known as a tourist destination, â??but 75 percent of our business was local,â?• Patty Hontalas said. And when it closed, nostalgic tributes flowed in.




Louisâ?? was a tourist destination but the majority of the clientele were locals, said Patty Hontales, pictured with her husband, Tom. (Photo courtesy of Tom Hontalas)

â??I ate there for over 55 years. Had many dinner dates, lots of hot fudge sundaes and more breakfast than I can count,â?• Louise Lee posted on Facebook. â??Never a bad meal or experience! So very sad that it has come to an end.â?•

Longtime customers remembered Rachel Lelchuck, a trilingual waitress who worked at Louisâ?? for more than half a century, not retiring until she was about 80. â??She was the real reason we kept coming back. We loved Rachel. Golden Gate Bridge, Lombard Street, Golden Gate Park, Coit Tower,

and Rachel â?? thatâ??s San Francisco,â?• posted Marco Place. (Hereâ??s a video of Lelchuck recalling her time at Louisâ??.)

When many kids were free to enjoy their summers, Bill and his brother were busy working. â??Iâ??d hardly ever see my friends,â?• Bill said. â??But I liked the money.â?• His mother used to withhold half of his paycheck and put it in the bank. Eventually, he used that cash to buy a bicycle and later his first car.

His favorite memories include working with his grandmother, who taught him to cook eggs over medium and hamburgers. â??And making people happy when they got their food.â?• The wait staff would call out orders to the kitchen and when they were ready, the cook would ring a bell â?? â??ding, ding, ding.â?•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Bill Hontales started work at Louisâ?? Restaurant at the age of 10. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Knowing heâ??d likely manage Louisâ?? someday, Bill Hontalas, a graduate of Lowell High School, attended the Hotel and Restaurant program at City College of San Francisco. He and his brother became partners.

However, the job had a downside that nearly cost Bill his life. Work was tiring and could be stressful. He needed to be at the restaurant at 4.30 a.m. to do prep, readying chili and clam chowder before the doors opened. He loved his employees but managing them wasnâ??t always easy.

Like many restaurant workers, he would go out after work and drink and eat â?? often to excess, he said.

## Home full of memorabilia

The restaurant closed for eight months in 2010 for a major remodel. With too much time on his hands, Billâ??s eating and drinking lurched out of control. The one-time All-City tackle and varsity wrestler saw his weight balloon to 380 pounds. â??People started telling me I didnâ??t look good, that I looked jaundiced,â?• he said.

They were right, he said. He was jaundiced, a sign of liver disease. Ultimately, he had two liver transplants â?? the first failed â?? and a kidney replacement. He was in an Arizona hospital for 170 days and wasnâ??t able to attend the last breakfast. â??It was a wonder that I survived,â?• he marveled.

Four years later his health is much better, and his weight is down to 215 pounds. His home is stuffed with Louisâ?? memorabilia. The restaurantâ??s popcorn machine, which still works, is in the family room. The walls sport vintage menus and an enormous Sutro Baths poster. He creates mosaics and does woodwork in his crowded garage workshop.

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Bill Hontales in front of the former Louisâ?? Restaurant, which stayed in business for more than 80 years. (Photo by Colin Campbell)

Tom Hontalas, 66, is retired. He and Patty, 63, a real estate agent specializing in helping seniors downsize, live in Pacifica, and take frequent ocean cruises. There are no plans to reopen Louisâ??, but

some of the younger family members may launch a food truck, selling items like the chili and minestrone the restaurant was known for, Patty said.

Closing the restaurant was difficult,â?• Tom said, â??but Bill and I had discussed what to do when our lease ended, even prior to Covid. We were hardly making any money. Food and labor costs were crazy, and we were both getting older. So, the decision wasnâ??t that hard, but it was still emotional.â?•

Bill is still a bit bitter, saying that the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, the landlord for the area, showed little interest in offering terms for a new lease they could accept.â??It could still be open,â?• he said a bit wistfully.

Nonetheless, he seems a contented man. Reflecting on his life, he smiled and said: â??One job, one wife, and one house.â?•

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