

From fisherman to cook to inmate to owner: Frankie Balistreriâ??s odyssey to opening his dream restaurant

Description

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When his mother, Lucrezia, was diagnosed with cancer, then 25-year-old Frankie Gaetano Balistreri cared for her at home. She craved her favorite Sicilian dishes and called out her wishes from her bed.

â?? â??Frankie, *pasta con sarde*!â?? â?•(Pasta with sardines); â?? â??Frankie, *sfingi*!â?? (powdered sugar donuts with ricotta filling)



Frankie Balistreri fine-tuned his cooking skills while caring for his ailing Sicilian mother, who passed away in 1986. Here, with his youngest son, Frankie Jr., heâ??s on his way to serve his customers. (All photos by Colin Campbell)

â??I was running back and forth, up and down the hallway from the bedroom to the kitchen and sheâ??d say, â??You forgot to roast the pignoli!â?• (Pine nuts for the sardines). Sheâ??d taught me to cook, and I knew the dishes, but she was *particular:* â?? â??Frankie! Pine nuts and currants!â??â?•

She passed away â??in my armsâ?• in 1986.

Balistreri is short, barrel-chested, with powerful forearms and a charming, lopsided grin. He talks fast, his deep brown eyes glint with humor, and he often cracks himself up. Under his big apron, his T-shirt reads: â??When You See Frankie, Call the Cops.â?•

The 64-year-old chef, fisherman, husband, and father, jewel of North Beach, proprietor, (with his wife, Evelyn), of the popular Portofinoâ??s Restaurant on Grant Avenue, is beloved in his North Beach community, where everyone assumes he was born.

But he was born and raised till age six in Rosarito Beach, Tijuana, Mexico, where his Sicilian father fled after getting in trouble over contraband at the port of Palermo.

â??Dad left Sicily in the dead of the night, leaving his wife and month-old daughter, my sister. Mom found him 13 years later in Mexico City selling suits on the streets, hiding, just surviving. She forgave a lot!â?• he said. â??They moved to Rosarito Beach, where they opened a tourist shop on Third and Revolution, near the strip clubs, and Dad fished for octopus, mussels, clams, lobsters. I was born there in 1960. â??

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Finally in the U.S.

The family tried crossing the border illegally many times but never succeeded. â??Weâ??d meet our California Sicilian relatives at the border, exchanging fresh fish we brought â??em for the olive oil, cheese, and panettone they brought us.â?•

Finally, his San Francisco uncles sponsored the family for citizenship, and young Balistreri arrived here, almost seven, fluent in Sicilian and Spanish but not English.

Heâ??s still fluent in Spanish, and jokes with his Latino cooks and waiters at Portofinoâ??s. â??Hey Gordo,â?• he calls over to his cook, who Blistreri says â??dances when he cooks, all body parts moving at the stove. â??Slow down.â?•



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Balistreri, center, with a couple of his childhood friends in front of his restaurant, which opened the day before San Franciscoâ??s COVID lockdown was announced.

Talking to Balistreri at the parklet in front of his narrow, cozy restaurant, one is constantly interrupted by a stream of locals: high-fiving him, fake wrestling him, buying fresh fish from him: â??I went to school with that guy.â• â??This guy is my dentist â?? he is fixing me a grill.â• â??Thatâ??s my brotherâ??s wifeâ??s kid.â• â??Thatâ??s my lawyer.â•

Arriving in San Francisco in 1966, Balistreriâ??s dad, Gaetano â??Tomâ?• Balistreri, fished on a 70-foot trawler, and helped his brothers who were running breweries â?? â??They had the Hammâ??s,â?• he said.

The family, including big sister, Rosa, and younger brother, Vincent, settled in at 866 Lombard Street â??right below the crooked part.â?• The block was all Sicilians, he said, and â??no one spoke English

at home. My neighbor Mario Bugatto raised pigeons in his aviary, and I helped feed â??em and track â??em.

â??We kids played stickball and soldiers and ambushed each other in the bushes all over the SF Art Institute.â?• He hung out at the bird shop at Mason and Lombard, noting â??Thatâ??s where the wild parrots came from, those cherry-headed conures were brought here illegally and the owner let â??em go.â?•

The original Portofino

Around 1972, his dad quit fishing and opened the original Portofino Cafe at Columbus and Green, where young Frankie worked from age 12, prepping, busing, and cooking, â??I even was bartending â?? at a very tender age.â?•



Balistreri taking orders from customers seated in the parklet outside his restaurant on Grant Street, and below, championing Portofinoâ??s cooking.

Frankieâ??s speech is peppered with recipes; you canâ??t get far into a conversation without him reciting a recent dish he made. Recalling his momâ??s baking, he said, â??I make the best vegetarian *Sfincione* (Sicilian Square Pizza). Let the dough rise to its fullest, then layer saffron, cauliflower, anchovy, and oregano, sprinkle toasted breadcrumbs and pecorino cheese on top. Just put in the oven with lots of olive oil. â??Oh my God, I gotta go home and make one!â?•



From ages 9 to 16, he spent summers fishing with his grandparents and uncles, while living in his dadâ??s home village, Porticello, Sicily, (near Palermo). â??We fished for swordfish, tuna, and mackerel in the shipping lanes across from Libya. Then Iâ??d go into town, to Bagheria, and get my dadâ??s favorite whiskey, Crown Royal, in the cafeâ?• â?? for himself.

He graduated from San Franciscoâ??s Downtown High School, after being kicked out of Sacred Heart, and married a few years later. â??My first wife was Chinese, she lived up the hill from me.â?• They had a son, Gaetano, now 35.

Balistreri worked at Portofinoâ??s and spent summers fishing in Alaska, often with his brother Vince. â??I could make 30 grand in five weeks as a deckhand in Alaska.â?•

By the â??90â??s, Portofinoâ??s was serving up more than fine Sicilian food. â??There was gambling all night long in Portofinoâ??s basement, poker machines, slot machines,â?• he said, and in early 1994 the police raided. His dad was arrested for running a gambling operation. Though he entered a diversion program and performed community service, a year later the cafÃ© was raided again for illegal video poker game payoffs.

Balistreri, his dad and his brother were indicted for conspiracy to distribute drugs. He doesnâ??t dwell on the details, just refers to Google, â??You can look it up.â?•

A prison stint

His first marriage ended in 1994 when he was sentenced to prison. â??I was looking at 25 to life for racketeering.â?• He got three years and a delayed sentence. He served from 1999 to 2002.

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His first six months were at Taft Federal Prison in Kern County, the rest at Sheridan Federal Detention Center in Oregon. â??I was in with congressmen, senators, judges, all the white-collar guys, no rapists or druggies!â?•

Balistreriâ??s resourceful, irrepressible nature and cooking skills came in handy. First, he washed dishes. But his talents were soon discovered.



Balistreri, left, and his brother Vince on a fishing trip. Below, Vince and Balisteri in Alaska, where they spent summers making money as deckhands on fish boats. (Photos courtesy of Frankie Balistreri)



â??You know how many pans I had to clean, for 1,500 inmates? I said, â??Let me be the baker boss. Baking is where you can steal everything,â?• he grins. â??This old Jewish bookie from Florida was the baker, and I took over from him. All day I baked, from pancakes in the morning to pizza for dinner.â??

He had to follow federal guidelines on the recipes and learn how to make Kwanza dishes and kosher dishes for the Jewish prisoners, even pan dulce and empanadas for the Mexican holidays. â??The bookie showed me how to make booze: yeast with grapefruit peel makes fine grapefruit vodka if you ferment it. And prunes make wine.â?•

Cooking wasnâ??t enough to pass the time, so when another inmate suggested he place a personal ad in a few newspapers, he did. â??I had nobody to talk to â??cause I was getting divorced, so why not?â?•

For a pack of cigarettes, â??This Mexican coyote I was in prison with sent my photo to some Asian papers.â?• Balistreri had himself photographed in his khakis up against the perimeter prison yard fence, where you could see the oil derricks rising high into the sky, there off Interstate-5. â??I wrote that I was an oil rig worker and surveyor.â?•

Youâ??ve got mail

And the letters gushed in, like oil.

â??My prisoner number was 90949011 but everyone, even the custody officers, called me Joe Pesci: â??Hey Joe Pesci, you got mail.â??â?•

Letters began arriving from the Philippines, a few from Thailand.

â??Forty a day, 50 a day. There were too many letters to read so we sat around and traded them,â?• he said. â??My cellmate was a counterfeiter, and he sifted through the letters: â??She looks good. Not this one. Hey, maybe this oneâ??s for you.â?? â??

Balistreri whittled it down to 10 to 12 faithful correspondents. Among them was Evelyn, a Filipina who saw his ad in the back of a Philippine comic book. When Balistreri finally confessed that he was in prison, all but two stopped writing. â??Evelyn wrote sheâ??d wait for me because she admired my honesty. We were pen pals for seven years.â?• And they eventually married.



Evelyn and Frankie Balistreri married in 2005 and work together at their restaurant.

Balistreri got out on Dec. 13, 2002, and landed in Manila on March 3, 2005. Those dates are indelible; they roll off his tongue. â??I got out with nothing and no credit, but jobs waiting for me at the wharf at local restaurants: Pompeiâ??s, Aliotoâ??s, and later at U.S. Restaurant.â?• All since closed.

In 2005, after saving some money and as soon as he got off parole, he flew to the Philippines to meet her. They stayed at the Manila Shangri-La, a top luxury hotel. â??Gloria Arroyo was staying down the hall,â?• he said.
Evelyn watches her husband describe their courtship with an inscrutable expression, as she unloads restaurant supplies from their Toyota TRD.

Marriage and challenges

â??When I came here in 2005, I started running with the tears and fire,â?• she said, referring to becoming pregnant as soon as she arrived, and the early financial challenges the couple faced.

â??It was hectic, overwhelming, I didnâ??t know what was going on, I didnâ??t speak good English, and my first job was McDonaldâ??s. I thought America was: If you work hard, you find dollars on the street and get rich. But you need a hundred jobs to be OK.â??

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They were married at City Hall in 2005, and Frankie opened Palermoâ??s Deli on Vallejo Street, training Evelyn in the family business. When â??taxes bit me in the ass,â?• in 2008, he said, he sold it. Itâ??s now run by his brother Vincent and his niece as Palermoâ??s Deli II.

There were hard years after losing the deli. Evelyn, by now the mother of a toddler, and pregnant with their second son, worked as a janitor at a North Beach bakery and at a beauty salon. Balistreri drove delivery trucks for Lettieri, a specialty foods distributor.

Both worked on the Red and White fleet as servers for party cruises. Still, they couldnâ??t make rent and ended up couch surfing with extended family, then moving into an SRO in the Tenderloin. â??My youngest was a month old, and the bed bugs were eating him alive.â?•

For 11 months they were homeless, â??My kids grew up real fast.â?•

Finally, they got into a family shelter. Then, Balistreri got in an accident while driving for Lettieri; his shoulder required five surgeries.

Dream delayed

Ironically, the insurance settlement he received got them back on their feet, and back to North Beach, where they raised their three sons, Giocino, now 18, Anthony, now 16, and Frankie Jr., now 10. None of them work at the restaurant.



Balistreri loves to chat it up with his customers, many of whom are also friends.

On March 17, 2020, Frankieâ??s dream of opening a fine seafood restaurant where his recipes could be showcased came true. Portofino had its long-planned grand opening but the next day Mayor Breed announced the COVID lockdown.

Hard times, but they survived by, as many restaurants did, by relying on takeout orders. Balistreri cooked and delivered.

Evelyn smiles when asked how things are now, as they prep on an August afternoon. â??I got three kids growing up, our lives are exciting and surprising. One day weâ??re good, one day is not.â?•

Balistreri jokes, â??The last time I took a vacation was when I was locked up. I came out and I started opening places. Who has time for vacation?â?•

As they unload supplies, another North Beach denizen walks by: â??Hey Frankie, whatcha got there? Whatcha selling now, shark fins?â?•

â??No, of course not,â?• he grins, â?? â??cause thatâ??s illegal.â?•

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