

# Feelin' Groovy

BY LISA RICHMON

Same Restaurant Syndrome (“SRS”) is what I call the tendency to eat at the same few restaurants 365 days a year. I realized that my own restaurant libido hovered on the low side when I was constantly lulled back to the same three spots on Laskin Road in Virginia Beach. Tired of the repetition, my husband ferried me to Captain Groovy’s, where “exposure therapy” consisted of karma burgers with salmon, seafood pot pie, and a Greek Isles salad, Groovy’s style.

The possible spread of SRS occurred to me when plans to meet clients and friends for lunch and dinner came up. When asked where I wanted to go, I’d often suggest Captain Groovy’s. The response was the same.

“What’s Captain Groovy’s?”

Dozens of people I know are clueless about David Watts’ culinary comeback. At Captain Groovy’s since its opening in September 2007, the creator of Bella Pasta, Café David and Havana broke the mold on Seafood Grill & Raw Bar-meets-Spanish, Greek, Cuban, Caribbean, Cajun, Lowcountry, Southern and Thai—with lots of outdoor seating and a casualX3 vibe. I started to wonder how shrimp and grits, and banana-imbued French toast this groovy could eclipse the collective radar of so many people whose days are measured in meals, not hours.

At Captain Groovy’s, even the back story has a back story.

Captain Groovy’s is the lovechild of Sandy White and chef David Watts.

Its success could be rooted in something deeper than house specialties like conch chowder, seafood pot pie and miso-glazed grouper with Asian pear salsa. What makes it feel groovy is the alchemy of love-after-loss bundled into the sea-loving spirit of Sandy’s late husband, Morgan, a tugboat captain, who happened to be the best friend of David’s brother. The restaurant is Sandy and David’s tribute to Morgan and the boating passion he shared with Sandy during their rich marriage.

“People around the world loved Morgan,” says David. “He took everyone in.”

“His CB handle was Captain Groovy,” Sandy says, smiling.

“So, how did you two get together?” I asked Sandy; the two wed in 2009 but have been together since 2003. “I’ve known David since Café David. He’s a hard guy to read.”

“I felt the same way,” she said. “I used to tell Morgan, ‘Your friend David is an indifferent asshole.’” Morgan would get upset and defend David. ‘You don’t know him,’ he’d say.”

Restaurant drama.

At Havana, things went south. The food was well-received but David wasn’t in a good personal space for years. “It was a defense mechanism,” he says. “I was beaten down by the bullshit of partnerships.”

Seven years post-Havana, David can’t say enough good about his partner

at Captain Groovy’s.

“Sandy turned a crack corner into something amazing.” He oversees the kitchen but refuses credit for the steady flow of new devotees from Camellia Shores, Chic’s Beach, East Beach, and Larchmont.

“She did this. ...It’s all her,” he says in a mini-rant over the tendency for some people to overlook Sandy’s role. “Sandy deserves all the credit.”

Sandy White is a real estate agent, former social worker and the mother of one daughter, who saw the potential in an abandoned Laundromat on Shore Drive near Little Creek Road. But, in order to nurture an idea to life, she had to get David back to their home in Willoughby from Barbados, where he lived several months out of the year doing catering for villas and weddings. The idea for the location started with a void in her life.

“I wanted a place I could meet a girlfriend for dinner and drinks and feel comfortable as a single woman. There were plenty of places to go when I lived in Great Neck, but nothing here.”

On David’s next trip home from Barbados, she told him. “I have something I want you to see.”

“I felt it right away,” he says. Overnight he went from “I don’t want to ever do a restaurant again” to “I always wanted a raw bar.” The couple’s division of labor was established early on in the birthing process. “I chased off the prostitutes and David took care of the drug dealers.”

A small cult following at Groovy’s could be a mild case of SRS. Or, it could also be the way David infuses his Italian heritage into Bora Bora tuna and the island influences on his psychedelic mushroom. It could also be the infusion of two wonderful marriages into dishes like Sandy Point shrimp (named after her first boat, Sandy Point), that draws scads of East-Beachers like Donna and Chris Cowdrey one to three times a week.

“The sushi is comparable to sushi I ate while living in Japan, and his oysters are the best,” says Donna. “Whatever they do—whether it’s Easter

Sunday or half-priced appetizers — it’s always beautifully done, but it’s comfortable and they don’t put on airs.”

Donna and her husband became homesick for Captain Groovy’s while enjoying a two-week anniversary cruise to the Mediterranean. “Today is our first day back. The first thing Chris asked this morning was where I wanted to go tonight for our 36th anniversary.”

Her response: “Do you even need to ask?”

Speaking of SRS, David says he can pretty much guarantee certain people who will be there every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday night. I remind myself that I’m married to a Groovy’s groupie with a band of converts still trying to figure out why they didn’t know about it two years ago.

I ask David what it’s like being married to the owner. “For the first time, I’m really in control even though I was the one who owned and created all my other restaurants.” Almost smiling he says, “I’ve always wanted to feel this way.”



OPPOSITE: David Watts with wife Sandy White on the patio of Captain Groovy’s.

ABOVE: A Groovy’s signature dish, little neck clams simmered in olive oil and white wine with lots of garlic and fresh basil.

