

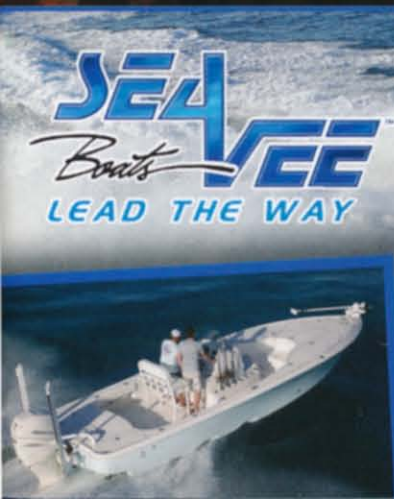
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Nothing *But the* **Best**



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Nothing *But the* Best

by Linda A. McKee

"Start spreading the news / I am leaving today / I want to be a part of it / New York New York"

Once you've lived in the Keys, you know local people who are called "Conchs" and visiting people who are called "northerners" and then there are people like Laurenzo "Larry" Calvano, who are called "Legends".

Calvano is the owner and operator of Jimmy Johnson's Big Chill, and a fan of Frank Sinatra. He may owe his love of crooning to Ol' Blue Eyes, but

his drive to be an outstanding restaurateur he owes to his forefathers. A third generation pizzaiolo (pizza maker) from Naples, Italy, Larry's grandfather emigrated through Ellis Island and settled in New York in 1912. However, his savvy professional career he credits to his mother, "I owe my business sense to my mother. She had a computer and a calculator in her brain and spoke three languages."

Larry began his young life in the Big Apple where his father, Enrico,

continued the family tradition of making the "dough" just as his father and grandfather did in Italy. Then, in 1972, the Calvano's moved to Ft. Lauderdale where his father started Enrico's New York Style Pizza. Soon Larry began attending St. Thomas Aquinas High School (STA) which is known for developing young freshman boys into NFL draft picks. It was at STA that Larry developed life long bonds with his teammates which continue today. While dining at the Big Chill, one will enjoy the exquisite cuisine of Executive Chef Dominic Congemi, the

brother of one of Larry's high school teammates, Calvano smiles as he reflects on Chef Dominic, "They just don't come any better."

We'll visit a palace and dine with a king, we're gonna' start livin' you wait and see..."

In 2008, the world was treated to a digitally remastered album of Frank Sinatra songs entitled *Nothing but the Best*; it was a risk. But there are always risks when trying new things. The skeptics scoffed, and doyens doubted, but the fans found it phenomenal. In March of that same year, Calvano also took a risk. With the opening of the Big Chill, Calvano, and beautiful wife Jami, thought life couldn't get any better and were excited to begin a new adventure in the Florida Keys. "At first I thought we'd come in and set up a big steak house with a South Beach feel, but we learned very quickly that you don't come to the Keys to be in South Beach" states Calvano. He continues by saying that he didn't understand when people tried to explain the island's easy going way of life. "People would tell me, 'It's the Keys,' and I didn't get it at first, I thought I was on Mars." It took about three years before Calvano lightened the mood and was accepted by the locals, making it the renowned restaurant, sports and tiki bar it is today. However, in 2008 things didn't seem as optimistic, as it proved to be a difficult year. Just months after becoming a minority shareholder in the restaurant, Calvano learned that the world has a way of creating chaos when it's least expected. After all, that's life.



"That's life I tell ya, I can't deny it / I thought of quitting baby / but my heart just ain't gonna' buy it"

In May of 2008, just two months after the opening of the Big Chill, Enrico Calvano, Larry's beloved father passed away from cancer. Then, four months after his new business adventure began, the housing bubble burst and the United States experienced the worst recession since the Great Depression. While Wall Street staggered from the massive blow, like a stunned prize fighter, people around

the United States lost their jobs, and a ripple effect was felt around the world causing tourism in south Florida to come to a halt. As bills began to pile up, it became obvious that the restaurant was in trouble. To save the business, Larry bought out his partners, going from a minority shareholder to a majority owner and operator. But there were times that even Calvano questioned the Big Chill's future, but his staff encouraged him. "I learned from my parents that you are only as good as your staff, without them I'm nothing." Now, the Big Chill offers a wide array of dining

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choices, with a new menu featuring a slow cooked prime rib, a Mahi BLT sandwich, and the Coach's Pigskin Nachos. Of course, Larry could not forget his roots, "One the second anniversary of my father's death, I went out and bought a pizza oven in his honor and Enrico's New York Style Pizza at the Big Chill was born. "We make our dough fresh every day, not any of that frozen stuff." From several outdoor venues that includes private cabanas, a Tiki bar, and casual dining on the water, to an indoor sports bar and air conditioned upscale restaurant with white linen tablecloths and gorgeous sunset views overlooking the bay the Big Chill is more than just a locals favorite. The restaurant has been featured on Good Morning America, The Food Network, and is frequented by celebrity visitors such as Gene Hackman, Elle Macpherson, Terry Bradshaw, Troy Aikman, and of course Jimmy Johnson. The Big Chill is

a place to sit back, relax and enjoy life no matter what your walk of life. "We have great times, and great sunsets, it's a fun, friendly place." Today Larry, Jami, and son Michael have made the keys their home and call Key Largo My Kind of Town.

"This is my kind of town, (Key Largo) is... / My kind of people, too/ people who smile at you"

While many enjoy the relaxing island feel and laid back atmosphere they find at the Big Chill, locals of the upper keys aren't just smiling because of the great food and good times. Jimmy Johnson's Big Chill is an avid supporter of the island community. "We've found that the community takes care of us and we take care of them" states Calvano. Local musicians play nightly, and the restaurant's big heart contributes to many of the local organizations in

the upper keys such as, the Sons of Italy, Island Dolphin Care, Woof Stock, Special Olympics, Children of Fallen Officers, and Take Stock in Children. The Big Chill generously fed 300 participants in the 2014's Relay for Life which included cancer survivors and their family members. In addition, they donate to local schools, the Make-A-Wish Foundation, and will soon be working with Habitat for Humanity.

So how does the owner of such a big conglomeration "chill out" when not at work? A guitar from the Hard Rock Café sitting in the corner of Calvano's office gives a hint, but as with many music lovers, picking a favorite song is tough, "I love every song I play... right now I think it's Pearl Jam, I love to play good ol' rock and roll." Then there are the loves of his life "after my wife of course", his three English Bulldogs, Bruno, Lola, and



Gia. But above all Calvano says he just likes to laugh with people and have fun. "I'm the biggest clown here, I've found along the way if you don't love what you're doing you shouldn't be doing it. My favorite quote is from Charlie Chaplin, 'A day without laughter is a day wasted'".

"The best is yet to come/ and babe won't that be fine? / You think you've seen the sun/ but you ain't seen it shine"

While one might think the Big Chill can't possibly offer more, Larry Calvano never stops dreaming. With wife Jami as the Catering Director, the Big Chill continues to deliver, "Parties are what we do, no one does it quite like

us. If you want to propel down from a helicopter we can do that. We have a niche for going above and beyond. When you put Jimmy Johnson's name on something there's a sense of pride to represent him, we can't be anything less than the best."

Just as Ol' Blue Eyes serenaded the world as only he could, the Big Chill's friendly atmosphere and delectable fares serenades the senses with luxuries that cannot be found anywhere else. Sinatra's words seem to echo the struggle and successes of creative entrepreneur Larry Calvano;

"Yes, there were times, I'm sure you knew / When I bit off more than I could chew. / But through

it all, when there was doubt, / I ate it up and spit it out./ I faced it all and I stood tall;

And did it my way... Yes it was my way."

Linda A. McKee is a freelance writer & photographer. You can email her at lmckeevire2me@outlook.com