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Dealing with rumors

By Patricia Henley, Assistant News Editor

It can be fun to pass along a juicy tidbit of small-town news - but owners of at least two local restaurants wish people would get the facts straight before spreading unfounded gossip.

Gia and Michael Ghilarducci said they are looking forward to 2005, which will be their 20th year owning and operating the Depot Hotel restaurant at 241 First St. W. They remain committed to offering high-quality, rustic, romantic dining at the Depot. Despite recent rapidly spreading rumors, the couple has not even considered selling, closing or getting out of their family-owned business in any way - and they want their customers to know that.

And the husband-and-wife team of Dave Whiteley and Chris Finlay just bought the building that houses their Vaquero Restaurant and Bar at 144 W. Napa St. They are full of plans for Vaquero in the coming year and committed to building on their current success - again, in direct contrast to circulating rumors.

"The bad part of a rumor is that it grows," said Pam Gibson, economic development project manager for a joint program of the Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce and the City of Sonoma. "If anyone has ever played the children's game 'telephone,' you know that you start with a fact, it gets distorted in the telling, it gets further distorted in the retelling and by the end you have the whole town closing."

No one knows how particular rumors get started, Gibson said. It is true that Glen Ellen's Cellar Cat Café shut down abruptly in October. Then the 26-seat La Poste restaurant on Broadway closed when the owner had an opportunity to sell and look for another, larger location. A new restaurant will be opening at the Broadway site.

The owners of the popular Mexican eatery Maya have put their place up for sale, wanting to spend less time working and more time as a family. And Piatti restaurant has announced it is closing for a three-month remodeling project.

Plus, after 11 successful years operating The General's Daughter restaurant, owner/developer Suzanne Brangham is ready to move on to other things and is considering converting the historic structure back into a luxurious private residence, with other houses added to the property.

All those changes have sparked talk, Gibson said - and just like in the game "telephone," things may have gotten garbled in the retelling.

Sonoma Valley Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Jennifer Yankovich said one of the chamber's roles is rumor control.

"It's important not to jump to conclusions when you don't really know," Yankovich said. "You hear rumors all the time."

If chamber staff hear something about a local business, they'll check directly with the owner of that company to find out what is really happening.

"If we do hear mumbblings we check them out," Yankovich said. "The bottom line is that for small businesses or family businesses, it's their livelihoods that are affected. It's important to not just believe what you hear on the street, but to check it out. ... What was a game when you were younger really affects people's livelihoods."

That's proved true for Gia Ghilarducci at the Depot Hotel. Rumors are common in the restaurant industry, she said, so she didn't take it too seriously the first week of December when rumors started that she and her husband were selling or closing the restaurant. She figured it would soon blow over when people found out it wasn't true.

"We hadn't even thought about (selling or closing). We didn't even talk about it," she said. "We have done absolutely nothing that could have started it."

Although she and Michael have been spending their free time playing with a 10-acre vineyard they bought in Lake County, their home is here. Their son, Antonio, is training as a chef and has spent the last two weeks helping his father in the Depot kitchen. Their daughter, Gianna Kelly, and son-in-law, John Kelly, just opened a local law practice. The Ghilarducci family is here to stay. Gia and Michael live in an apartment above the restaurant, and have no plans to move or change how they make their living.

But the whispers took on a life of their own, spreading rapidly around the Valley. After about a week it seemed like every customer who came in was saying, "We're sorry you're closing."

"What was odd was that they didn't even ask us if it was true," Gia said.

They started getting questions about whether gift certificates for the restaurant would be honored after Christmas and if reservations should be canceled for New Year's Eve. Then Gia got a cancellation call from some people who had booked a wedding rehearsal dinner for next May. They were worried that by then the restaurant would have a different chef and manager, not Gia and Michael.

"They had heard it from so many sources they assumed it had to be true. I managed to convince them that we aren't going anywhere - because we're not. ... When I literally swore on a stack of Bibles and my mother's good name, they were reassured," Gia said.

She found out that people she considered to be her friends were among those repeating the rumors. That hurt.

"It really is very damaging," she said. "I don't think people realize the damage they're doing when they spread these rumors. They just consider it interesting local gossip."

She's most concerned about the people she hasn't heard from, who might have heard and believed the gossip.

"This is the time of year when people book summer weddings. We do a lot of weddings here," Gia said. "What we can't know is the people who aren't calling us. I don't know who has decided not to call me because they think we're not going to be here."

Vaquero restaurant has faced similar problems since rumors that it might be sold or closed began circulating a few months ago, said co-owner Finlay. A member of a group that held an event there last year mentioned to their server that they had hoped to hold it at Vaquero next year but heard they were closing.

"We got on the phone and convinced them we are not closing and booked the event," Finlay said.

They sold fewer gift certificates this Christmas season compared to last year. And people have even come up to her at the gas station to ask if she was shutting Vaquero.

"Some even just asked when we were closing - they took it for granted," Finlay said. "We are not closing. We are not closing."

Having just bought the building that houses their restaurant, Finlay and her husband, Whiteley, are full of plans for Vaquero's future.

"We're going forward," Whiteley said. "We have an investment here and it's a good business."

Whiteley's son, Seth, is bar manager. "Seth has some great ideas for the bar to develop the happy hour biz," Finlay said.

There will continue to be music and dancing on Friday and Saturday nights. And to emphasize that while the menu has some Mexican influences, this is not a Mexican restaurant - "Vaquero" is Spanish for "cowboy" - so the name will be changed to Vaquero Steakhouse.

Rumors are circulating about other local businesses. Finlay, Whiteley and the Ghilarduccis hope that those hearing these interesting little tidbits will check out the facts before passing the information along.

They also hope their loyal customers will drop by, and see for themselves how things are going.

"Our business is entirely a locally supported business," Gia Ghilarducci said. "We don't rely on tourists; we don't rely on out-of-towners. But when local people think we're (selling or closing), it hurts."