



TAHOEtalk

MOUNTAIN FACES

first couple of truckee dining

mountain faces



Robyn Sills and Ed Coleman. Photo by Niobe Burden

The sound of rattling ice in a cocktail shaker greets the visitor walking down the low-lit steps of Pianeta. A crowd of fresh-faced diners waits for their table at an active bar. Frescoed walls highlighted by Da Vinci drawings, an antique globe collection and mahogany woodwork surround huge plates of rigatoni and pollo affumicato. Yet for the entire restaurant's cushy digs and inspired food, it is hostess and co-owner Robyn Sills who remains the masterstroke of this Truckee restaurant's charms. Customers pouring in from the cool Sierra night are greeted by her flavorful, disarming smile, making them feel immediately at home.

Less than half a block away at the corner of Commercial Row, Truckee's main street, things are even livelier at Pianeta's sister eatery, Pacific Crest, and the adjacent Truckee-classic saloon, Bar of America. Throngs of partygoers pack the 30-stool-long bar that, during the course of the evening, has taken on the fevered pitch of a prohibition speakeasy. Groups dance tightly in front of the cover band at the far end of the cavernous dance hall while peppery waitresses slice their way through the overflowing scrum toward diners who sit cozily around lounge tables near the double doors at the entrance. Inside the more intimate surroundings of the adjacent Pacific Crest, customers dine off white tablecloth and chat romantically over tiger prawns and fricassee of rabbit, seemingly immune to the chaos an olive toss away.

Ed Coleman, both Sills' business and life partner, soaks in the happy fun from his perch near the building's front door. His eyes are without a trace of hardness, his hair boyishly tousled like a bird's nest.

Coleman has a quick smile and offhand way of talking that is tailor-made for the goldfish environment that can engulf anybody in the restaurant. His humor is delivered casually, almost as an afterthought.

"You have your rough and tumble moments," he says. "You'll be cleaning spaghetti off the floor in between searching for a bottle of wine and the phone ringing. A line is forming at the door. Then, just as you want to turn and flee, someone comes up and tells you what a good time they've had and shakes your hand. You stop for a second and let it all flow in and out."

Sills and Coleman are the first couple of Truckee's flourishing, but highly competitive restaurant scene, both for what they have accomplished together and for their separate pasts. Neither Pianeta nor Pacific Crest is faddish. They draw on a strong sense of aesthetics, products of the talent and tenacity of their hardworking owners, who shared a vision of good health and good cuisine.

"Restaurants are places to restore the body, mind and spirit," says Sills, who developed her restaurant pedigree working at Tahoe institutions such as Sunnyside, Woldale's and Chamber's Landing and, in a partnership with Gary Bulmer, as owner of Earthly Delights catering. "Ed and I enjoy a common approach toward the guest. We understand the need to reach out to the customer and care about and even nurture the attention they need."

Coleman's local restaurant history is even more circuitous. He and then-girlfriend Sue "Rosie" Dunsford, of Tahoe City's long-loved Rosie's Café, joined other partners to open the short-lived Truckee restaurant, River Street Café. Coleman then moved on to open another new Truckee restaurant in partnership with Jennifer Haag: Cottonwoods. He and Sills teamed up in 1996 with the opening of Pacific Crest.

Obviously, both Sills and Coleman know something about the stresses of owning and running a restaurant as a couple. Being together 24/7 in a competitive business forces even the most loving of unions to at times act like the Bickersons. Add into the mix not just one restaurant, but two locations within close proximity and some would think Sills and Coleman were creating a recipe for disaster. Yet the exact opposite has occurred.

"The restaurants don't compete against each other," says Coleman, "even with their similarly-priced menus. If anything, the restaurants complement each other. We're busier all the time. A lot of it deals with the growth of Truckee and the balance the area now has, but we like to think our popularity derives from an extremely loyal and local clientele."

"Ed and Robyn share an enthusiasm for food and drink, and each is willing to experiment with unusual ingredients, décor and wine," says John Whited, a Tahoe resident and wine distributor. "Their creativity opened up the doors for other cutting-edge Truckee restaurants such as Dragonfly and Moody's. They take a chance on wines nobody else has heard of, inexpensive wines that a couple months later are getting high marks in *Wine Spectator*. Their restaurants are fun and adventurous."

Their success is based both on their food and the meticulous details of their restaurant's interiors — both eclectic and creative mixes of styles. Pacific Crest's menu offers simple, countryside flavors and classic bistro dishes including wood-fired pizza. A casual wine bar features a turn-of-the-century, handcrafted counter and a stellar 300-selection wine list.

"We kept the prices way down at Pacific Crest so everybody could be introduced to our food," says Coleman. "It soon became pretty obvious that we had a hot product, but it was a small space for both of us to express all we wanted."

Two years later they took over the lease of Bar of America. The historic building was infamous for fisticuffs, hard drinking and a raucous roaring '80s scene, but it had shifted away from its youthful popularity and declined into an aging, boozy atmosphere.

"At one time or another, a laundry, post office, bank and even bus station occupied the building," says Coleman. "Anyone who knew Truckee knew of the Bar of America, but nobody wanted to go in there. We didn't want to change the place as much as clean it up and serve food, too. We installed clean restrooms, tacked the carpet down and added Guinness and a few micro-brews. People began coming back down to this corner not just to drink, but eat and listen to music."

The same year, 1998, they opened Pianeta. Offering regional Italian cooking, a full bar and eclectic wines, the restaurant's atmosphere inspires a sense of Italian Renaissance, with Da Vinci-inspired drawings on its tall walls. The antipasto plate, complete with house marinated olives and fresh roasted garlic, is a favorite at the bar, along with signature spicy crab cakes, "Frittelle di Granchio." Today, Pianeta strives for lighter, more contemporary versions of regional Italian cuisine classics, but with no discernible loss of flavor. There's a healthy emphasis on fresh herbs and marinades.

"It was decided that I'd manage Pianeta while Ed would oversee both the Bar of America and Pacific Crest," Sills says. "So far it's worked. I think our success is due in part to our mutual respect for each other's ideas. We support each other, but let each other do our own thing." Both are also avid outdoors people, cross-country skiing, cycling or mountain biking to escape the pressure-cooker environment of their work lives.

While the couple has enjoyed great success along Commercial Row, another venture was not so lucky. Cashing in on their wave of success, in 2002 they opened a third restaurant, Treviso, in Sausalito. While the restaurant enjoyed much success, the added stress, time spent away from each other and traveling to and from Marin County caused them to sell the restaurant after two years.

"It was just too much to handle," says Coleman. "We learned a lot. It was refreshing to come home. We love Truckee and our customers. We really want to provide a good experience for them, keep our restaurants fresh and enjoy our mountain life."

— Robert Frohlich