

UNDER THE TOQUE CHEF KELLY BRIGLIO OF PARADISE PANTRY

Apr 28, 2021 | Cover Story, Nancy D. Lackey Shaffer, News, Ventura



Twitter



Facebook

PICTURED: Chef Kelly Briglio with lobster at Paradise Pantry. *Photo by Viktor Budnik Food Photography*

For Chef Kelly Briglio, one half of the dynamic duo (with partner Tina Thayer) behind Paradise Pantry, her culinary adventures started at home. Raised first in rural Madera and later Ojai (she moved to the valley when she was just 6 years old), Briglio grew up among a family that lived, loved and ate well together.

"I had the luck of growing up with homemade family meals almost every night," Briglio recalls. "I had my very Italian grandparents living next door or down the street from us all of our young lives. My grandma never left the house except to go to the store or go to church and the rest of the time she would be cooking. Both my Mom (who is an amazing cook and still working with me on the Paradise Pantry kitchen team) and I learned much of our core culinary base from Grandma B."

"I definitely began my love for food and cooking around our family dinner table," Briglio sums up. "Bringing people together with food and drink runs deep in the blood."

It was an excellent start, augmented by on-the-job experience. Briglio started working in restaurants at the tender age of 14, and hasn't left. Admittedly a "self-taught" chef from the "school of Burn & Learn," Briglio's resume includes a stint at Rosarito Beach Cafe (where Fluid State now sits), where she helped prepare high-end Mexican cuisine under chef and mentor Sandy Smith. At just 24, she opened her first restaurant, Restorante Pirana, in Costa Rica, serving Mexican, Caribbean and Asian fusion.

"Day and night of constant cooking and creating menus was all the school I needed. Of course, I never stop learning," she says.

By 2003, Briglio was back in Ventura and the proprietor of Westside Cellar, which longtime locals recall for its plush, elegant interior and an eclectic menu with fine wine, gourmet bites and "the first restaurant cheese menu in town." This hip hotspot is no more, but "the Westside Cellar cheese plate is the same classic plating you see at Paradise Pantry today. This is also where Tina and my friendship and working relationship began."



Kel's Killer Mac 'n' Cheese with Lobster. Photo by Viktor Budnik Food Photography

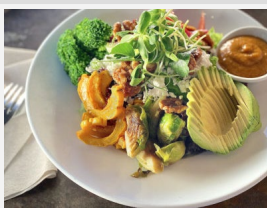
Thayer was front-of-house manager and shared Briglio's love (some might say obsession) with cheese and wine. Together they joined forces to open Paradise Pantry in 2007, at 677 East Main Street, near Fir.

"I was looking for a new challenge outside of the kitchen," Briglio explains. "I wanted to experience the life of a cheese monger and drink all the glorious wine I could get my hands on. We created what we ourselves desired to have in our community."

It was a winning combination. Gourmet cheese, wines to go with it, and owners who knew this world inside and out: Paradise Pantry was *the* spot to find decadent appetizer platters, gourmet ingredients for special occasions or just something rare and delicious to enjoy at home. As its menu and popularity grew, Briglio and Thayer began to contemplate evolving Paradise Pantry into a full-blown restaurant. When a larger spot on lower Main Street in Downtown Ventura became available in 2013, they relocated and expanded.

You can still find amazing cheese and wine at Paradise Pantry, as well as an artisan market specializing in locally sourced pickles, nuts and chocolate; specialty crackers and jams; breads; cookies; kitchen implements and more. But now the ever-changing menu offers more substantial meals crafted from seasonal ingredients. Favorites include Kel's Killer Mac'n' Cheese with Lobster, amazing burgers (available during a monthly Burger Week), beautiful salads and to-die-for dinner specials.

"We consider our menu type as 'elevated soul food,'" Briglio says. "Everything is made in house and is unique to Paradise Pantry. I am addicted to creating seasonal dishes from what the land is offering. I am fiercely loyal to my local farms and believe in representing them with the respect and thoughtfulness that their produce deserves. Our goal is to always try to be better, share new exciting products and dishes and to overall deliver an unforgettable experience."



Market Salad from Paradise Pantry. Photo by Viktor Budnik Food Photography

An experience that doesn't end once the check is paid: Briglio and Thayer love talking shop with their customers, educating them on wine and cheese, and helping them create collections of delicious foods and products to bring home or gift baskets to send to loved ones. Paradise Pantry also offers a wine club.

"We are unique in that our restaurant is connected to our artisan cheese counter and wine shop," Briglio says. "Tina puts together incredible monthly wine clubs and hand selects our eclectic offering of wine in the market. We have something for everyone and love putting gift bags and baskets together for anyone on your list. Not to mention our winemaker dinners and cheese events! Basically we are a one-stop shop for the true foodie."

The restaurant was thriving prior to March 2020. With COVID-19 changing the food industry landscape, Paradise Pantry had to pivot back to more of a takeout model.

"The pandemic has been a roller coaster of a year for everyone," Briglio admits. "At Paradise we *did whatever it took* to continue to be here for our customers, community and staff. Our entire menu went into takeout mode without skipping too much of a beat, and we spent days and weeks adjusting to safety guidelines and restrictions to keep everyone safe. I know that Tina and I did, and still do, our very best to keep our menu and market items fresh, delicious and creative. Trying our best to create *some* sense of normalcy in these crazy times. Embracing the new abnormal."

What has never changed: Briglio's passion for bringing people together (safely) around food and wine, and supporting the farmers, artisans and fellow foodies that enable her, because they are as excited by quality and craftsmanship as she is.

"I am passionate to represent and support all the people that give my craft meaning," she emphasizes. "I believe in representing the people behind the food. The local farms that grow the vegetables and pick the fruit. Farmstead cheeses and artisan meats. The beekeepers harvesting our local honey. Wine from naturally farmed vineyards. Our local fishmongers, chocolate companies and coffee roasters."

"Real food, real people, real stories," Briglio continues. "They are my inspiration and I cannot stop creating around their offerings."