

6 DYNAMIC DUOS

Alameda's New Generation of Mom and Pops

*By Mary Eisenhart
Photography by Terry VanderHeiden*

Family business is an integral part of Alameda, both socially and economically, and there's a whole new generation of residents arriving and putting down roots here.

The mom and pops of today's Alameda represent a thriving crop of businesses that happen to be owned and operated by couples who, from very different paths, have arrived here in pursuit of a dream. While these businesses are quite different, they have many things in common. For instance, starting and running a small business, they all concede, is a lot of work, and caring for small children complicates the situation.

Living with a business partner adds pressure, so it's more important than ever to figure out ways to work together harmoniously.

Couples cope with these issues in varying ways. Generally, each person brings different skills to the partnership, but while some prefer a style of general pitching in as needed, others divide the business responsibilities strictly to keep affairs running smoothly.

A definite common thread is the passion these business people bring to their work. Each one exudes a level of excellence only achieved through driven, genuine, personal commitment.

Boniere Bakery

Donna Meadows
Justin McCarter

When French pastry chef Donna Meadows and husband Justin McCarter took over Park Street's venerable Boniere Bakery in September 1999, culture clash ensued. The sixth owners in the bakery's 120-year lifetime, they had a clear idea what they wanted to do, and it turned out Alameda was maybe not quite ready for it.

"This was a pretty rapid departure from what the bakery had been in the past. So it took a little while," McCarter says. The previous and recently retired owner had operated a traditional American-style bakery with German overtones, and his customers were soon wondering aloud what had become of their apple strudel. "It probably took two years to overcome that," McCarter says.

Looking at Boniere's pastry display case, it's clear there's an artist at work in the kitchen. At 22, already an accomplished pastry chef, Meadows was a founding partner in the four-star Flying Saucer restaurant in San Francisco. She went on to work as the opening chef at SF's Hawthorne Lane and to partner with famed chocolatier Alfred Schilling at his one-year-long store project on Union Square. Meadows then headed for New York City to work as pastry chef at the highly regarded River Café. But while she loved New York, San Diego-born McCarter hated it. The upshot was that the couple returned to California in search of work, McCarter to San Diego where he ran a hot-dog stand for the summer; Meadows to her native Bay Area. At that point, she says, "I was hell-bent to find a place so we could live in the Bay Area."

Which made it fortunate that Meadows' brother-in-law, a jeweler by trade, did work for Frank Lopez of SilverSword Jewelers Goldsmith on Park Street. Lopez mentioned that the bakery down the street was looking for new owners.

And so McCarter and Meadows officially moved to Alameda, opened the bakery and became part of the community scene. The bakery's float won first prize in the 2002 Fourth of July parade. And, oh, yes, in the interim they had two children, Isabelle and Riley.



Pastry chef Donna Meadows and Justin McCarter operate Boniere Bakery.

So how do they juggle the numerous responsibilities of a busy bakery, a toddler, and a baby? Looking a little frayed around the edges, having arrived belatedly for our interview with the kids in tow, McCarter says, "It's like being a fireman. You just run around putting out fires all day long."

Normally, one of them is at the bakery while the other's home with the kids, he says, and normally Meadows has the morning shift.

"We work very well together, but the reason is, Donna is the queen of the kitchen who knows every single thing

that's going on," McCarter says.

And after four years, things have come around. Now instead of wondering where the strudel went, people complain when there aren't any more Donna's Delights, and customers leave notes saying how much they liked their most recent purchase. "I think that takes a lot, for somebody to actually take the time to say how much they enjoyed it, or how good their cake was," McCarter says. "That happens a lot these days. I think we've turned the corner."

*Boniere Bakery, 1417 Park St.,
(510) 522-0110*



Speisekammer

Cindy and Peter Kahl

Cindy and Peter Kahl were already veterans of the restaurant business before they noticed that Lincoln Avenue's venerable dining spot Le Bouc was on the market. He had trained in Berlin with a world-class French chef before coming to the United States and becoming the founding chef partner in San Francisco's popular Suppenküche restaurant. She, meanwhile, had fulfilled a longtime dream by buying the Café du Nord, a Basque restaurant on Market Street, and transforming it into a legendary nightspot, where, she says, she did everything except cook.

In 1999, however, while they awaited the birth of their first child, the rigors of the night life started to lose their charm, and they started looking for something a little closer to home, as they were settling in nicely in Alameda. The fact that Le Bouc's owners, who themselves had been a young European couple starting out when they launched the restaurant in the '70s, were willing to finance the deal made it possible to acquire the building Cindy Kahl had her eye on. They soon embarked on extensive renovations, transforming the wood-paneled front room into a light, sunny space and putting in a gorgeous bar, while continuing with their current jobs.

"We thought it would be a good idea to have a German restaurant over here," says Cindy Kahl, as there are many Germans in the East Bay and no German restaurants. "It seemed to me like a simpler operation than what I was running, which was appealing to me. Plus we wanted to buy a building, because in San Francisco we'd be paying top-dollar rent, and then you have nothing. We have a huge place here now. The dish station here is bigger than the kitchen at Café du Nord or Suppenküche."

Cindy and Peter Kahl are partners in Speisekammer where he's the chef and she handles the front-of-house duties.

Adds Peter Kahl, "It was very appealing that the kitchen was pretty much ready to go. Whoever set it up 20 years ago set it so it fit my cooking."

Launching in somewhat scary times (they'd signed the papers right after 9/11), they opened the doors in June 2002 and were immediately swamped. Recalls Cindy Kahl, "It was kind of shocking—we didn't expect that many people to show up on the first night, because we didn't announce it. But you know, in Alameda, people talk, and they want to try something new." When the novelty wore off, so did the boom, but after a slow patch, business is picking up steadily, drawing diners from as far away as Sacramento.

Peter Kahl developed a menu that, while based on traditional German cuisine, took advantage of his French training and the availability of fresh California foods to create dishes that were lighter and tastier. Among their regular customers are German-born chefs from other restaurants around the area. Peter Kahl reports with pride that when one such group returned from a trip to the old country, "They said our food tasted much better than the German food in Germany. I thought that was a really nice compliment."

They divide Speisekammer's workload according to their lifelong experience. She handles the front-of-house responsibilities while he oversees the kitchen, assisted by kitchen manager Michele Cavaleri, whom both praise highly. They're both at the restaurant during the day, then take turns staying home with the kids at night, and, says Cindy Kahl, it all works well. They've managed to avoid the pitfalls that often afflict couples working together, Peter Kahl says, because they're on familiar territory: "We both have been in the business for so long. When couples start a business together who have never worked very long in that kind of business, I believe they will have a problem working together, because they don't know what to expect. But we know exactly what to expect. We knew two years before we started, that's how it's going to be, and we didn't even really discuss it."

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Jiva Creative

Stacie Kizziar

Eric Lee

When Stacie Kizziar and Eric Lee were considering a name change for their design firm a few years back, one that would reflect their expanding and synergistic activities, they came across the word “Jiva,” which, in Sanskrit and Aboriginal languages, connotes “life force.”

And, in a slightly spooky bit of synchronicity, they’d already picked a new logo featuring fire, air, earth and water when a friend gave them some literature describing “Jiva” as “the animator of the elements.”

“We like when those things happen,” laughs Lee.

“Animating the elements” is very much what Jiva does for its clients. While their services include relatively simple tasks such as designing a logo or letterhead, they can do much more. Lee says, “It’s great to do a logo for someone, but then we like applying it to an identity and a whole branding system, and then including within that branding system the Web site. And then if they need a video to help promote their products, and a Web application to either sell or show off their products, there’s something synergistic about taking that approach.”

With a client list that includes many Alameda businesses (not to mention the City of Alameda, Alameda Power and Telecom and the USS Hornet), as well as an impressively eclectic and multinational roster ranging from the Guam Visitor’s Bureau and France Telecom to Kaiser Permanente and the San Francisco Girls Chorus, Jiva also works with communications agencies to develop and implement a strategy that best delivers the client’s message—and evolves it as times change. Says Kizziar, “We know what we know best, and we know what other people do best, and we try and work with them to give the client the best product possible.”

Kizziar previously worked with a large multinational consulting firm, specializing in hospitality and real estate marketing and working in the emerging field of knowledge management. Lee had previously been a network administrator (and

Stacie Kizziar and Eric Lee (pictured with their pug Winnie) are the husband-and-wife duo behind Jiva Creative.

confesses to the occasional urge to go hook up a LAN) before getting into the design world. Their complementary skills and experience (and those of their small staff, a designer and a programmer) enable them to meet just about any challenge—e.g., the Web-based knowledge-sharing application they developed and maintain for A.T. Kearney Procurement Solutions Inc. Lee says, “We’re artists, but we’re also business people, and we’re in the business of helping clients achieve something artistic.” Adds Kizziar: “And it’s all based on a marketing and strategy perspective.”


While the husband-and-wife team is serious about business (to the point of referring to each other as business partners rather than spouses when dealing with clients—as Kizziar points out, “We truly think of each other as partners because we bring different skills to the business. Without either of our parts, we wouldn’t have a business.”), they are far from stuffy. For one thing, their pug, Winnie, presides over the office on most days and has acquired an enthusiastic fan club. “A lot of the time, people will come into the office just to see her,” Lee says. Also—a fact that clients have learned well and scheduled their meetings accordingly—every Thursday they order in from Burritos on Wheels, and it’s not uncommon for clients to show up for working lunches with dogs in tow. “Some days it’s a zoo in here, literally!” Kizziar laughs.

Lee and Kizziar both grew up in San Leandro, fell in love with Alameda and moved here before launching their business. Over time, they’ve found the location nothing but an advantage, not only for the lower overhead and the short commute, but because it’s central and accessible to clients in the entire Bay Area.

And they love working together, even though, as Kizziar concedes, being partners in Jiva often means that they’re thinking and talking about work on weekends and holidays. As Lee says, “There was a time we didn’t work together. We’re definitely a lot happier now. Always being together and always having our dog with us, and living and working only five minutes apart—I think the benefits of having our own business and working together far outweigh the alternative.”

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Christie Farren Estrada and Harry Estrada are business partners in Cycle City.

Cycle City

Christie Farren Estrada
Harry Estrada

Alameda is a great town for bicycles. Just ask Harry Estrada. “The Bay Farm loop is seven miles, perfect for beginners. We have Shoreline, and we have a lot of bike lanes here.” Besides, the streets are swept regularly, allowing for pleasant bike lanes, and tree shaded against the summer heat. The city sponsors Bike to Work days and is behind the whole two-wheeled lifestyle, and entire families will take off on weekend mornings to cruise the local garage sales.

Conveniently poised on High Street, a short hop from Bay Farm Island, is Cycle City, owned and operated by Harry Estrada and Christie Farren Estrada since 1999. Theirs is a somewhat unusual partnership in that they were married at the time they launched the store, aren’t any more, but retain their passion and commitment to their business. “We work well together in the shop; we continue to run Cycle City together as a team, and probably always will,” says Farren Estrada.

They acquired (and renamed) the business from Cycle Sports, originally in South Shore and later on High Street, where Estrada started as a mechanic in 1991 and eventually rose to manager. When the owner decided he was spread too thin with two stores (the other, much larger, is in Oakland), he offered to sell the Alameda branch to the couple, whose complementary skills and personalities were soon a hit with their serious and knowledgeable clientele.

The shop deals in top-of-the line equipment, and Estrada’s mechanical expertise is much in demand from both recreational bike riders and those with a serious emotional and financial investment in their equipment.

“We’re more of a service-oriented shop,” he says. “We have people coming from all

over, not just Alameda. People with very expensive bikes have the little shop where they trust the mechanic, and even if they move far away, they come back to get their bike repaired because they don't trust the other shops." Farren Estrada reports that they have a number of serious customers stationed at the nearby Coast Guard base, and when they get transferred, they stay in touch via e-mail. "One of our customers, who turned into a friend, is stationed in Hawaii now. There are bike shops in Hawaii, but he's e-mailing us for Harry to take care of something for him."

Farren Estrada, for her part, comes from a business background and found herself plunged from the beginning into what Estrada laughs and calls "the headache part" of the business: from drawing up the initial business plan to handling accounting, advertising and other day-to-day administrative chores. Not to mention a good deal of highly personalized customer service—helped, she says, by the fact that she's always been good at remembering names.

More important than a strict division of labor, though, is a spirit—shared by Farren Estrada, Estrada and their small but highly capable staff—of pitching in to take care of whatever comes up. "It is always a team effort," Farren Estrada emphasizes.

For much of the year—it lets up a bit in winter—the store borders on a 24/7 job, which often finds Estrada or Farren Estrada at the computer in the wee hours, updating the Web site or catching up on the ordering. But, they say, the rewards are huge.

"We meet so many people that have the same interests," says Estrada. "You get so you actually go for a bike ride with customers, who eventually become friends. That's very rewarding. Everybody who comes in here, automatically we have something in common—bike riding."

And while burnout does occasionally strike, he adds, a little reflection on the joys of doing what you like in a friendly, casual atmosphere soon puts such thoughts to flight. And if that fails, the perfect cure is near to hand: "Ride a bike!"

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June and Mike Chow own Coffee and Tea Traders on Bay Farm Island, but it's Mike Chow who worries with the store.

Coffee and Tea Traders

June and Mike Chow

Strategically situated on Bay Farm Island, where it's become a Mecca for bicycle and skating enthusiasts, commuters, students and people who just want to sit and read the paper over a nice cappuccino, sits Coffee and Tea Traders, owned since 1989 by Mike and June Chow. But in contrast to the other couples in this article, the Chows have a somewhat different division of labor: He works at the store. She doesn't.

This, Mike Chow explains, was a conscious decision on their part. "My parents worked together, and her parents worked together," he says, and he and June Chow wanted something a bit more individual for themselves.

Mike Chow grew up in Oakland and began his career in the high-powered world of commercial real estate. When the partnerships he was involved with were wound up, he started looking for a new and different career and found inspiration in the coffee house near the office where June Chow was then working. So, when they learned that the previous owners wanted to sell Coffee and Tea Traders, it was a perfect fit.

Of course, first he had to learn the business, so during the early years, the coffee house consumed his entire waking life, while June Chow took care of their two now-teenage children and just about all the rest of the family's day-to-day needs. "There were times I felt like I was a single mom," she laughs now. "But I knew he needed to start this thing and get it going, and I supported him." On the rare occasions when the need arose, she's helped out with the store. But as he moved up the

learning curve and hired and trained staff, the crunch gradually lessened a bit,” and “that gave him more time to spend at home with the children.”

Help comes from another quarter in the family, though—son Aaron, now a junior in high school, has been working on Saturdays at the shop since he was 11.

These days the kids are in high school, June Chow is working at a healthcare services company, and Mike Chow's day still starts at about 4 in the morning. Officially, the shop doesn't open till about 6:30, but he's there setting up long before that, and the customers often trickle in early. He'll usually stay around till midday, goes home for a while and returns to close up the shop at 5:30, often not getting home till around 7.

He takes a very hands-on approach, picking just the right blend and roast of beans, training employees to make the perfect mocha (theirs, he says, uses pure, real chocolate, none of that fake stuff), and chatting with the clientele, something he especially enjoys. His customers, he says, are “people who have been here a long time, and they enjoy the small family business.” He focuses on taking care of his customers day to day so they tell their friends. “Customers are the ones who give you the best advertising,” he says, and his have a tendency to come back even when they move to other areas.

While he concedes running a neighborhood coffee shop is a lot more demanding, physically and mentally, than his former line of work, “I'm fortunate that I found something I enjoy doing. I enjoy it a lot more than I did real estate.” He loves meeting different people all day long, and while he might get less sleep these days, his sleep is untroubled by the nightmares of the real-estate days, when he'd frequently wake up worrying about potential disasters beyond his control. Now, when he's working, it's 110 percent. But “once the door's shut, I don't have to worry about it. I pack my stuff, I go home, that's it. I don't think about it.”

Not till 4 the next morning, anyway.
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Bahgie's Baby Boutique

Debra and Gary Foutch

Gary Foutch had an idyllic childhood growing up on pre-development Bay Farm Island, went to first Lincoln, then Alameda High School, and would have graduated in 1966. Except that one day his father, a truck driver, got a job in Pocatello, Idaho, and summarily uprooted the family. "I was just happy as a clam here," he says now. "You take me out of this and put me in Idaho—it was a culture shock I still haven't gotten over."

Not that it was a total loss—he met his wife, Debra, there. They subsequently moved to Oregon, raised their family and were working in the stock-trading world in San Francisco when, in 2002, they both got laid off in the economic downturn. And so, he says, "We took everything we had, all our retirement, all our savings, every penny, and put it into this."

"This" is Bahgie's Baby Boutique, opened in fall 2002. Walk into its sunny, airy space next door to Tucker's SuperCreamed Ice Cream parlor and enter a wonderland of togs, toys and accessories for babies and children, all apparently selected and displayed with a doting grandparent's eye. This is no coincidence. Indeed, the name "Bahgie" came from their first grandchild's attempts to say "Grandma," and, as Gary Foutch says, "We buy for our store like we're buying for our grandchildren." They're striving for a more traditional, old-fashioned view of childhood (you will not, he says, find "the latest Britney" on the premises), from the retro Velocipede tricycles to the hand-knit sweaters to the tiny aviator jackets. Some

Debra and Gary Foutch left the stock-trading world of San Francisco for Alameda and opened Bahgie's Baby Boutique with their retirement savings.

of the items come from Europe; some come from cottage industries in Alameda.

One surprise they encountered was that many people seemed to prefer discussing their potential purchases with a woman, so even though, as Gary Foutch puts it, "I'm a grandfather! I'm qualified!" Debra Foutch does the majority of the customer service. He, on the other hand, has a more extensive background in finance, so he's often the one in the back doing paperwork.

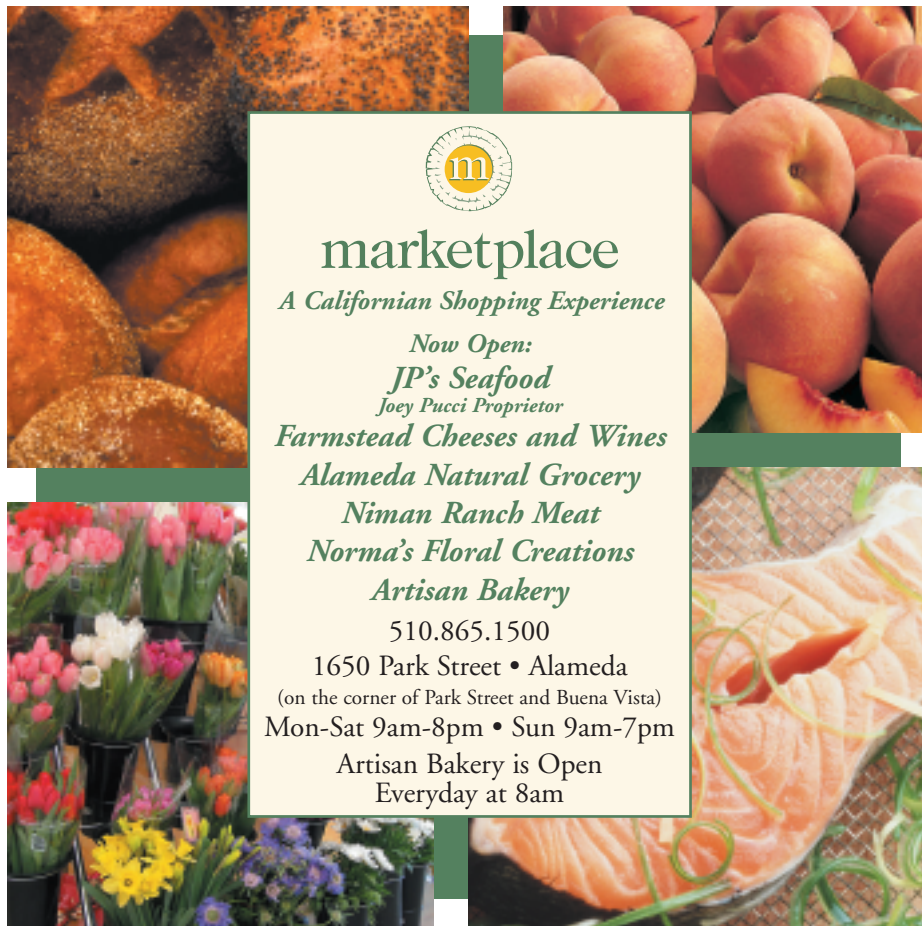
For the couple, the store is a dream come true on a number of levels. Far from succumbing to the too-much-togetherness syndrome that often afflicts the family business, they're thrilled at being able to finally work together after 33 years of marriage. Says Debra Foutch: "This has been a dream of ours from day one. After 33 years, we're best friends. Who better to spend time with than your best friend? For the last year, we have spent every single minute together."

Also, says Gary Foutch, there's the fact that nobody comes into a baby store with a nasty attitude. Shoppers are generally excited about a first child or grandchild, an upcoming birthday, the first day of school, or some other milestone, and the happy vibes are contagious. People come in the store to chat and check out the latest arrivals as well as to buy; kids often run in and ask Debra or Gary Foutch to put a video on the player located in one corner of the store.

And, out and about in town, people are just nicer, the couple agrees. "Alameda people are caring," says Gary Foutch. "Enough to take the time to look you in the eye and say good morning to you." Adds Debra Foutch, "We say good morning to three people on the way in from the parking lot. People constantly stop and actually have a conversation with me." There's the parade, the street fairs, the holiday festivities ...

Indeed, perhaps the biggest dream come true of all is coming home to the place from which young Gary Foutch was so rudely torn. "It took me 40 years to get back here," he says. "No matter where I've been in the world, I remembered Alameda. When I come over the Park Street bridge, I get goosebumps. And once I get over the bridge—OK, I'm home. And all my cares just go out the window. If I never have to leave Alameda again I'll be the happiest guy in the world."

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