

Salt in the Blood, Slav Style

Contributed by Gretchen Williams Tostrup
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World War II in Europe had repercussions all over the globe for years after, and San Pedro was no exception. The Croatian community was subject to a public misconception of things "foreign," and battled to overcome prejudice. The Dalmatian American Club has presented a seafood luncheon every other month since 1960, promoting the community and its allegiance and devotion to the U.S. The original group of fishermen and local businessmen began the gathering 48 years ago, and now their grandchildren are preserving the tradition.

Matson terminal manager Ryan Baird came to meet his granddad Pete Bosnich, one of the original members of the group. He joined a strong cadre of old timers with Pete in the corner, cutting up the state of the port, trade and fishing. Founding member Vince Felando remembered the first lunch, with 20 men getting together to eat fish. A salty crew of retired Harbor Department workers roared with laughter on the other side of the room, remembering the old days. ILWU pensioners were well represented, keeping things afloat near the bar. The social hour before the swordfish lunch is a vital part of the meeting, greeting and eating.

From that first swordfish feast, the luncheon has expanded to include the cream of harbor business and politics. Dignitaries from all walks of life come for the great food and splendid networking. LAPD Joan McNamara visited her old Harbor Division friends, and sat near Father John Provenza, new to Mary Star of the Sea. Janice Hahn received warm greetings from her constituency, and looked radiant. Gojko Spralja maintained order with an iron fist in a velvet glove

Reservations for the luncheon are recommended, as the numbers now stretch to 350-400 diners. Some families and groups traditionally sit together, and reserve whole tables. Prompt attendance is encouraged, and the meal service is efficient, in response to the business day.

Spralja led the group in the Pledge of Allegiance to the Flag, and then bolstered the crowd with a strong rendition of "God Bless America". A few tears were observed in this otherwise stalwart tribe, responding to true love for community and country.

Strong legs and a willing spirit seem to be the criteria to be a waitress at Dalmatian American Hall. The kitchen is up a tight set of stairs, and this multi-course luncheon includes salad, soup, pasta, fish and vegetables, coffee and cookies. Each course requires a change of crockery, with the resulting number of trays of dishes. The good service and gracious manner are part of the luncheon tradition. Though a large part of the appeal is social, the lunch is well known for a great menu.

The salad is lovely and crispy, with a mix of romaine and baby spring lettuces, and a tangy Italian dressing. Fresh rolls and butter adorn every table. Carafes of red, white and rosé wine are ready for serving. Family style service encourages conversation, and it is impossible to leave without a new friend or five after this luncheon.

The soup was hearty and authentic, full of vegetables, greens and beans, a first cousin to pastafazool. Pasta is always mostaccioli with marinara sauce, flavorful and sprinkled with fresh Parmesan cheese. Al dente and delicious, the taste of mama's kitchen came to every table in the room.

Grilled swordfish is the traditional favorite, though salmon is sometimes substituted due to availability. Lovely grill marks score the large fish steaks, seasoned with olive oil, and served with fragrant lemon wedges.

Straightforward, fresh, and grilled perfectly, this is what the luncheon is all about – appreciation for good fish that transcends nationality or origin. Lively talk and active knives and forks created a happy sound in the big room.

The Croatian community reaches out in a wonderful way, giving a party every other month, and inviting everyone! Well worth the \$23, this San Pedro tradition is held the last Friday of every odd month, with the exception of November, when it is held the third Friday. Social time begins at 11:30am, with luncheon served at noon.

Dalmatian American Club Fish Luncheon Dalmatian American Hall 1639 S.Palos Verdes Street San Pedro (310)831-

2629.

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