



Family ties led Gina and Frank Lister (above) to forgo psychology and psychiatry for foodservice, but their professional training has helped them analyze, understand, and communicate with staff and customers for four decades. They have worked with Executive Chef Josh Sandberg (center) to create a popular menu.

An Unlikely Recipe for Success

By Tom Dixon

One psychiatric occupational therapist-turned-chef. One psychological therapist-turned-businessman/handyman. A genuine love of learning, great food, and people. Good communication skills, long hours of hard work, and an “amazingly dedicated and talented” staff.

Mix well, sprinkle with naiveté, chutzpah, and persistence, and bake for 40 years.

This is the recipe Gina and Frank Lister followed to develop the Hearthstone Bistro in Muskegon, Michigan—and turn it into one of the most successful restaurants in the history of this Lake Michigan community.

The married couple was living in Connecticut and working in the mental health field when Gina's parents in Muskegon proposed that the family purchase and run a motel and attached diner there. With nary a lick of foodservice experience, the Listers packed up and assumed responsibility for the restaurant—Gina in the kitchen, Frank out front.

“We served pretty typical diner food at the start,” Gina recalls. “But after a year of struggle we realized we needed to make a drastic change for the sake of both our business and our personal satisfaction. We decided to focus on gourmet soups and overstuffed sandwiches.”

Creative cuisine

Keep in mind that this was the late 1970s, well before Panera and other national chains made this kind of dining fashionable. “It was a gutsy move,” Gina concedes. “But it worked.” The eatery became well known for creative selections including its Wisconsin Cheddar Cheese and Popcorn Soup, which is still on the menu.

Soups and sandwiches remain menu staples, but the food offered has evolved to include a variety of contemporary cuisine. “The accent is on creativity,” Gina says. Hearthstone diners delight to find cranberries in their couscous, walnut pesto paired with goat cheese, and innovative items such as a Blackened Barramundi Sandwich served with carrot/cabbage/mango slaw and lime-cilantro aioli sweet-potato frites. “We make great use

of unlikely ingredient combinations,” she adds, “and we let the ingredients shine rather than imprinting them with our own egos.”

From the beginning the Listers devised all their own recipes. “If you want to offer a unique experience, you can't expect someone else do it for you,” Gina explains. The duo continuously monitors trends and techniques for inspiration, and travels far and wide to pursue their craft. “We went to Lyon, France, several years ago to perfect our escargot.”



For the past nine years, the Listers' culinary vision has been abetted by Executive Chef Josh Sandberg. “Although he isn't formally trained, he is a natural in the kitchen—and he's perfectly in sync with our food philosophy and management style,” Gina says. “If you don't have that, the whole dynamic of your restaurant can be thrown off.” »

Clockwise from top left: Award-winning Wisconsin Cheddar and Popcorn Soup; Crispy Almond and Brioche Crumbed Lake Perch; soft lighting and a cozy ambiance enhance the dining experience.



Restaurant Snapshot

-  **Operation:** Hearthstone Bistro
-  **Location:** Muskegon, Michigan
- Classification:** Casual Fine Dining
-  **Number of seats:** 215
-  **Dayparts reserved:** Lunch and dinner
-  **Check average:** \$19 (single)
-  **Signature dishes:** Wisconsin Cheddar and Popcorn Soup, French-Onion Gratinée Soup, Chicken Milanese, Berkshire-Pork Tomahawk Steak, Crispy Almond & Butter Brioche Crumbed Lake Perch, Natural Angus Braised-Beef Short Rib Bourguignon, Crispy Maple Pork Belly BLT, Steak Frites with creamed spinach.
-  **Years in business:** 40
-  **Front-of-the-house Staff:** 48
-  **Back-of-the-house Staff:** 30
-  **Guiding philosophy:** “We embrace the philosophy of genuine hospitality: Our guests come first.”

Investing in staff

Sandberg came up through the ranks at Hearthstone and benefited from an extensive training program. All training is guided by the principle that guests come first. “From that springs professionalism, teamwork, a passion for culinary excellence, a commitment to ‘play at the top of your game’ every day, and an understanding that we are part of a larger community,” Gina says. All this creates a culture that satisfies employees as much as guests.

“Several people have been with us since the beginning,” Gina raves, “and others have been here for decades. We now have children of employees working with us.”

Long-term employees have weathered many changes alongside the Listers. “Through the years,” Gina says, “we’ve owned or operated nine other restaurants in addition to the

Hearthstone.” About 10 years ago the couple decided to focus solely on the Hearthstone, which they call “the mothership.” They even razed the next-door motel to allow expansion. “Best decision ever,” Gina adds.

The expansion included a European-style outdoor terrace and a private dining room for banquets, which complements a thriving off-premises catering business. “Catering is about 20 percent of our sales now.”

It seems clear that the Listers will never stop tinkering with their recipe. But it always will remain grounded in their professional training. “Looking back,” Gina says, “our background in mental health prepared us very well for a business that depends on extraordinary communication and people skills.” —€



THE LISTER LIST

Gina and Frank Lister have compiled a compendium of success-boosting advice for independent restaurateurs. Some of our favorites:

1. *Be passionate about your craft.*
2. *Never, ever lose sight of the fact that your guests are always right—unless they're intoxicated, that is.*
3. *Respect and cherish your staff.*
4. *Train your staff and keep training them forever.*
5. *Never stop learning.*
6. *Know your competition.*
7. *Install warm, soft lighting; women will love you for it.*
8. *Patience, patience, patience.*
9. *Give back to your community.*
10. *Embrace and enjoy the new adventure of every day—it will reward you.*