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Four fine dining pioneers

These restaurateurs immigrated to this country and built decades-long successes. Orange County's current sophisticated culinary landscape owes them a nod.



If you'd accidentally stumbled into the banquet room of Zov's Bistro one recent afternoon, you'd think it was a rehearsal for some kind of farce. Things looked like they might get out of hand – and for good reason. They always do, or almost do, when Antonello's Antonio Cagnolo and Bruno Serato of The White House get together, egging each other on like the Marx Brothers about to create pandemonium. They drew Zov Karamardian to the edge of her regal deportment as she sat sipping Champagne. They even cadged a big smile from the gently dolorous John Ghoukassian of Bistango.

The last thing you'd assume was a gathering of Orange County's most venerable restaurateurs – each of whom came here before anyone equated the county with fine dining, and has carved out 30 years or more of success in the business.

But there they were, familiars, supporters of each other's charities and causes, deeply respectful of the other's original dining creations, and all mindful of each other's escape from war, poverty, political upheaval, and close encounters with calamity to find the stuff of dream in their American success.



Bruno Serato is a tough-looking guy, stocky and bald, who likes to dress in black. But the moment he sees friend Antonio Cagnolo, he smiles and breaks into voluble Italian, the conversation quickly rising to Hellzapoppin pitch.

Serato, who made the prestigious CNN Heroes list in 2011, had stopped by to unload the latest Caterina's Club brochures, which list the amount of Orange County children his restaurant keeps from going to bed hungry (3,000 a day, a new high in the 10-year program). The program serves more than 1,800 warm, nutritious meals every single night.

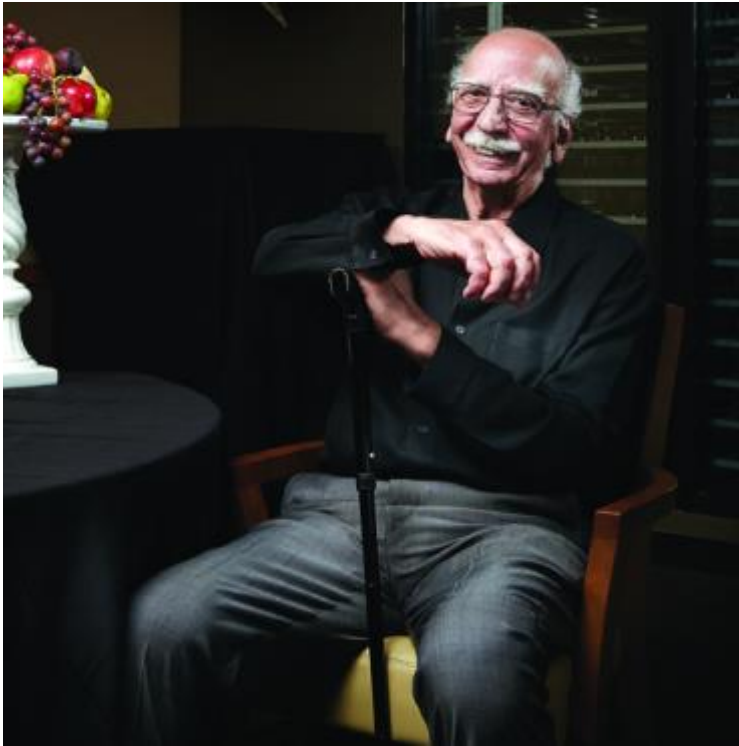
Neither Serato's demeanor nor his conversation alluded to the Feb. 4 fire that gutted his classic, popular restaurant, Anaheim White House.

"Somebody called at 4 a.m. to say there was a fire. I thought it was a joke," he offers when prompted to talk about the emergency. "I drove to Anaheim and saw flames, smoke, police. My heart was beating 200 miles an hour. It was the saddest day of my life."

But Serato, one of seven children born in a small town near Verona to parents who, during the war, took jobs as field workers in France, has always employed one of the most basic of business and management techniques: He works like a dog. When he took over the White House in 1987 with an option to buy ("A gorgeous building, built in 1909"), he served as waiter, host and bookkeeper, and slept on the premises. He built the business up, got good reviews. Two presidents dined there (Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush) as well as major league ballplayers in town for games at Angel Stadium. His mother Caterina, who'd fed starving German troops limping home from the war, took notice of local conditions, particularly with low-income families living full-time in Anaheim motels, and started the program to feed them.

It's not just Serato's bonhomie that's paid off. Within hours of the White House fire news, he began receiving phone calls from all over the world, offering solidarity and aid; his good friend Sophia Loren being one of the first. He now expects the White House to reopen later this year.

"I've been sad," Serato says, "but I've never had an unhappy day in my life."



John Ghoukassian had already spent a night in the slammer as a warning: If he didn't convert his fashionable Tehran night spot and restaurant, The Chattanooga, to Islamic government rules, he'd be imprisoned again and whipped. So one hot Friday August afternoon in 1979 he stood in a windbreaker waiting for a local bus to take him out of town. He'd paid a coyote \$20,000 to drive him through the rough terrain of Pakistan, over 1,400 miles on the back of a motorbike, to Zahedan, from which he'd fly out to Madrid and make his way through France to reunite with his wife and two children, who were living in Cannes. At any point he could have been killed or abandoned and left for dead. Turning back was unthinkable.

Eventually he made it to the United States, and California beckoned. He'd invested in property in Indio in the mid-'70s. But he knew restaurants better than real estate, and in 1984 went into partnership to create the first Bistango on La Cienega, when Restaurant Row was still in its heyday.

"It was trendy, a lot like Spago's, with Americanized French cuisine. We hired a well-known chef, Claude Segal, who had been with Ma Maison.

"But the problem with trendy is that people lose interest overnight and move to the next hot spot. I was naïve," Ghoukassian says of that first restaurant. "I didn't know trendy wouldn't last."

He got wind of a booming business trend in Orange County and in 1987 relocated to an improbable site for a restaurant, the ground floor of an Irvine office building, the Atrium. An artful building, to which he added a popularly artful restaurant, in food, décor, music and ever-changing wall exhibits. Wood floors and sidings, atmospheric lighting and brushed aluminum surfaces, along with a roof cluster of red beach umbrellas and a silky undulant horizontal curtain over the bar lend Bistango an adventurous look.

"It's a tricky balance. Iranian food hasn't changed much in 35 years, but American cuisine has. There are still steak-lovers, but there are more people who won't touch steak and want healthier food. There's more of a cultural mix than ever in Irvine. I've had an Italian and Japanese chef, and an Austrian chef from the French school. My regular chef now, Xavier Montoya, was our Mexican pastry chef earlier."

At 81, his lanky frame rests with deceptive calm on troubled currents. "Thirty years ago, I was alone and had to fight. My family didn't think I could make it," he says. "But defeat is something I cannot stand."



"The townspeople fled to the mountains to escape the bombings. But the mountains were too cold. The people went to live in stables. They huddled with each other and the animals to keep warm."

Cagnolo, 68, is referring to the late days of WWII, when American B-17 bombers chased German forces northward out of Italy along a route that included Cagnolo's birthplace, where his father and grandfather, both war veterans, served as the town butchers. "They fed the fascists one week and the Americans the next."

In the war's aftermath, his parents hoped for something better for their son than the bloody mess of slaughtering animals and serving the results. A profession, maybe. But Cagnolo was hooked. Food was more than food. It was life.

He began waiting on tables at age 11. At 13 he went to a hotel management school in Turin and later a more advanced one in Stuttgart. Soon he found himself in one of the world's opulent playgrounds, Monte Carlo, serving Prince Rainier and Princess Grace at the Hôtel de Paris.

But he suffered from incurable wanderlust, whose romance came to a bitter end in London in 1972 when, living in a windowless basement apartment during a miners' strike in the dead of winter, he had to walk two hours through blackout conditions to his job at the Royal Albert Hotel. He was miserable. A gambler at the hotel named Boris Vlasov, heir to an international fleet of luxury cruise liners, heard his tale at 3 a.m. one night over baccarat and took pity.

Two weeks later Cagnolo was in sunny California. ("The space, the freedom," he still marvels.) Later he became manager of Alfredo's at the South Coast Plaza hotel, serving up personal recipes to its owner, Henry Segerstrom, one of Orange County's wealthiest and most powerful benefactors.

"Let's do something for Antonio," he said to his aides one night, as Cagnolo stood by rustling up a shrimp dish. Hence Antonello, established in 1979.

Cagnolo says he worries about Orange County's drift toward corporate soullessness; he's stripped his award-winning restaurant's décor for a more rustic look, and re-trained his long-term staff to a return to a personal touch.

"No more looking at computers all the time," he says.

Otherwise his sense of liberation endures.

"At 68, I'm still hungry. I'm not through yet," says Cagnolo. (That's probably no exaggeration – after all, this is a man who became a new father again at age 60.) "My American dream is just as fresh as it's ever been."



The Middle East has been ravaged by violence so often and for so long that scarcely anyone leaves without bearing scars. Zovag Karamardian was born in Israel to a father who'd been orphaned in the Armenian genocide, and a mother who continued a matriarchal line of recipes and spices peculiar to the mountains of Syria.

After a childhood spent in Iraq, her family fled revolutionary Baghdad when she was a teenager. Relocated to San Francisco's Haight-Ashbury district in the height of the '60s counterculture spree, she began cooking at home for her working mother, and found her calling.

Passion would be more like it.

"I'm passionate about food, community, family, faith, the performing arts. I don't mean to demean Orange County, but there's no nucleus. But I see volunteerism on the rise, and here, in my world, more interest in community," says Karamardian.

Zov's counts a prestigious James Beard award among the restaurant's numerous honors, but Karamardian herself never went to culinary school. That hasn't stopped her from garnering countless awards, including Restaurateur of the Year by the California Restaurant Association and California Chef of the Year by the governor's office. She has written two cookbooks and cooked alongside food superstars such as Emeril Lagasse, Todd English, Michael Symon and even the woman she credits as her inspiration, Julia Child ("She did everything right").

She knew she was on to something when she found a small Tustin site, after catering from her home, and discovered that people coming in for takeout didn't want to leave.

"They didn't know about pomegranate molasses, urfa pepper, sumac and eggplant. Artisanal food was unheard of in Orange County," says the chef, who has tried several times over the decades to add a food shop at her Tustin location for adventurous home cooks. "People are more educated about food now, but I see less and less ethnic places. Personally, I'd like to see more chef-driven restaurants. In my opinion, a restaurant will really succeed with passion behind it, when it's run not just as a business. Cooking is a spiritual act; you do it with your whole heart. Chefs really care about where they buy ingredients, where food comes from. I'm here six days a week; I try and inspire the people in our kitchens."

What started as "a hobby" has grown into five restaurants, says Karamardian with no small hint of pride. The family business includes her husband, Gary, son, Armen, and daughter, Taleene.

"Making people happy makes me happy."