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TABLE OF CONTENTS

08 // Made in the Keys, U.S.A
A FAMILY AFFAIR
by Richard TAMBORRINO

16 // The Mad Brit
SCRUBBING HER WAY TO SUCCESS
by Richard TAMBORRINO

24 // A Key West Original
SUB LIME
by Cricket DESMARAIAS

30 // Tasty Treats
CHOCOLATE IS A HAPPY THING
by Richard TAMBORRINO

36 // Keys Fiction Writer
LUCY BURDETTE
by Ellen T. WHITE

MADE IN THE KEYS

| ABOVE: It takes a certain kind of passion to build a salt scrub empire and Laura Maddison has done just that. BELOW: Kermit Carpenter has been providing locals and visitors with assorted Key lime treats for over 25 years. |
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The Kino family’s Key West success has earned national attention. See the full story on page 8.
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A Family Affair

MADE IN THE U.S.A. CARRIES MORE WEIGHT TODAY NATIONALLY THAN PERHAPS EVER BEFORE. BUT WHEN MADE IN THE U.S.A. ALSO MEANS MADE IN THE KEYS — BY A RICH LINE OF CUBAN-AMERICAN DESCENDANTS — THEN YOU HAVE A REAL STORY TO TELL.

By Richard Tamborrino

An Old Town staple, Kino Sandals has been making popular, affordable, handcrafted sandals right here in Key West, in true quintessential Key West fashion for more than 50 years. But beyond this business’s sheer longevity, which is a rare accomplishment these days, especially in the Keys, it’s the leadership continuity the Lopez family has maintained throughout that impresses most.

The three children of Roberto and Margot Lopez — Robert Lopez, Ana Lopez Sariego and Christina Lopez Ruiz — brother and sisters, have been the Kino Sandals caretakers for many years. They have sustained the legacy of Roberto “Kino” Lopez, who brought the family to Key West from Cuba at a very turbulent time in the late 1950s, as the Castro regime was beginning to take hold.

Kino Lopez had owned a successful shoe factory in Cuba — until Fidel Castro showed up and claimed the factory for the government. The couple fled the country to start over. At the time, Robert was 4, Ana was 2 and Christina would be born a few months after the family all arrived in Key West.

The elder Lopez, whose childhood nickname was Kino — a derivation from Roberto’s middle name ‘de Aquino’ — started the business in Key West in 1966 with $3,000 he and his wife, Margot, had saved and a modest bank loan.

The children have now been running the business longer than their parents The company celebrated 53 years in business this year. Robert started in the business in 1975 and was followed into the business by both Ana and Christina, after each finished college and began raising their own families, in 1985.

Their father was instrumental in helping them get acclimated to the business. Roberto was dubbed a “sandalero” in Cuba, a local term for a Cuban shoemaker. He was the family’s chief shoe designer. But what was just as important as passing down the art of sandal making was the passion he instilled in his children.

The siblings also attribute a great deal of the success of the business to their mother and grandmother. Their grandmother, Ana Hernandez, contributed so much toward raising the children while the business was slowly evolving, and she also taught them the importance of a strong work ethic. Over time, she too was involved in the shoe assembly portion of the business. “Our grandmother and mother probably don’t get the credit they deserve...
The Lopez siblings have now been running the business longer than their parents. Kino Sandals has been operating in Key West for over 53 years.
for our family’s success,” said Robert. “They were both true inspirations to all of us and more importantly, how they instilled their passion in us,” he added.

Robert eventually took on the primary responsibility of managing the machinery and supplies, while the sisters combined to handle production, both in the warehouse and at the retail store. He explained the family dynamics as he showed off a collection of early sandal pencil sketches his father drew more than 50 years ago.

These direct descendants freely admit it’s rare today to see children follow in their parents’ footsteps. “This business is so unique, and we have seen so much competition over the years,” says Robert. “But our mother and father started this business here with virtually nothing and it means so much to us to carry on that legacy.”

The business is firmly rooted in Key West, operating out of two locations; one their retail outlet at Fitzpatrick and Greene streets, home for more than 40 years, and their one-story factory on Southard Street, just steps from the Green Parrot Bar. Inside that nondescript building, employees skillfully cut leather, stamp out rubber soles and sew one to the other. The final assembly then concludes a few blocks away at the retail shop where expectant customers can witness the magic.
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Success has not been automatic, with competition and other natural small-business factors almost always around. Robert and Christina recounted the difficulties they experienced after Hurricane Irma, when the cruise ships were slow to return, shoppers were scarce, and many employees were counting on their leadership for business to rebound. They survived that rough patch, and while some employees left the Keys, not one was taken off the payroll.

That's the aspect of the Kino Sandals legacy that Robert, Christina and Ana — who has been retired from the business for the past three years — always fostered: a "family" work environment. "We have employees who have been with us for 30 years," says Christina. "Our employees are very loyal because we've always operated like a family."

And it's not as if this long-standing family business hasn't progressed with the times, something you might not see simply by visiting the retail store. "Before the internet, our sales were more personal," says Robert. "Now, we do almost 30% of our business online and the family's third generation, Alan Johnson, who is Ana's son, and Robert Ruiz, Christina's son, manage our online and mail order business."

So, the legacy continues.

When asked what the "secret sauce" was in their footwear, Christina stated without hesitation, "They last forever." In a world where craftsmanship is sometimes sacrificed for speed and price, the Lopez family has managed to quietly maintain that delicate balance that makes customers come back for more. "Much of our business is repeat," Robert says proudly.

Robert shared they have been asked to manufacture sandals for other companies, but they have repeatedly declined. They have also remained steadfast in trying to use U.S.-made materials as often as possible, though that's become more and more challenging. "It's getting tougher and tougher to buy materials locally because of price. We still use U.S. leather, but some soling comes from Columbia and glue is from Puerto Rico, but we are holding firm wherever we can," says Robert.
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The family earned a rare distinction this past July when they were named one of 50 companies from all 50 states invited to participate in the White House’s Made in America showcase. Kino Sandals was chosen to represent the entire state of Florida at this event and were able to visit the White House and display their sandals for all to see.

President Trump is seen recognizing all the businesses from each state that embody American hard work and ingenuity.

Kino Sandals co-owner Christina Lopez Ruiz and son Robert Ruiz display a placard from the third annual Made in America showcase held at the White House in Washington, D.C.

The family earned a rare distinction this past July when they were named one of 50 companies from all 50 states invited to participate in the White House’s Made in America showcase. Kino Sandals was chosen to represent the entire state of Florida. The event highlighted one product from each state that embodies American hard work and ingenuity. The simple sandals that patriarch Roberto Lopez started making and selling in Key West in 1966 were now recognized nationally at the White House.

Christina later made an appearance on “Fox and Friends” to further discuss their Made in America accomplishment. Check out the video: https://video.foxnews.com/v/6081978432001/#sp=show-clips

Not only does their simple, successful formula live on, but now they are also sharing it with the rest of the country. Quite the accomplishment for a local business. ☺
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Dubbed the “Mad Brit” by some, Laura Maddison travels hundreds of miles each week making sure the Keys Salt Scrub is just about everywhere in the Keys.
Dubbed the “Mad Brit” by some friends, Laura Maddison, the sole owner/operator of Florida Keys Island Salts, LLC, or as many of us know them, The Keys Salt Scrub, has been able to forge a successful business in the Keys, despite many obstacles.

Originally from Kingsbridge, England, Maddison arrived in California shortly after her college years. Eight years later, she was offered a job she couldn’t refuse and made her way to Florida, where a path in the restaurant industry kept her on the mainland before deciding to make the Keys her home.

“I built another company from 2010-2012 that offered a similar product throughout the Keys and the Bahamas”, said Maddison. “But over time it became a very contentious relationship. There’s more to it than that, but let’s just say it was a bad relationship that I was glad to get out of.”

Teaming up with well-known restauranteur and Upper Keys businessman Bobby Stoky in 2012 turned out to be a winning formula. Together, they put their collective expertise into action and the meteoric growth begun.

Running a successful business is like constructing a fine meal — all the ingredients needed to make that meal have to be precise and meticulously prepared. Unfortunately, not all business owners are successful running a business. Just because you know how to cook doesn’t necessarily mean you know how to run a restaurant.
Maddison wears virtually every hat in running this business. Customer service is the primary focus; she often darts in and out of business restrooms throughout the Keys, keeping them stocked with her complimentary scrub so their customers can sample and purchase their own jars to take home. You’ll see her hand-crafted, tiki hut, wooden displays in retail outlets all well-stocked. “I travel up and down the Keys six days a week,” said Maddison. “When I’m not restocking, I’m doing events, festivals and shows, everything I can to let people experience my product.”

The hours can be grueling but the satisfaction she gets from satisfied customers makes it all worthwhile. “I had a mother approach me at the Nautical Flea Market a few years back who said she’d tried everything to rid herself of psoriasis and nothing worked until she started using our salt scrub,” Maddison recounted.

There was also a child with extreme eczema whose skin problems were helped tremendously after using their salt scrub, after other prescription treatments failed.

So, what exactly makes the salt scrub therapeutic? Salt is a natural antiseptic and coconut oil is a healing agent and when both are working in tandem, the scrub kills bacteria and propels the healing process. Salt makes wounds close, while coconut oil moisturizes, rejuvenates and accelerates the healing process.

“Every ingredient we use has a purpose. There’s a reason behind each scent. Lavender is included because of its calming, natural antiseptic and detoxifying qualities. You won’t find any peppermint or vanilla in our collection,” she says, “because those scents have no real connection to the Keys.”

Though Maddison doesn’t have the only game in town when it comes to salt scrubs, her product is genuine, it’s the official salt scrub of the Florida Keys and her Keys company is the only one that has the registered Secret Lessoily™ Formula — a proprietary blend of salts, coconut oil and all-natural essential oils that are all chemical- and cruelty-free.

Maddison wouldn’t reveal much more than that as it relates to her scrub because, since 2012, the competition has become fierce and there’s a high degree of idea stealing in this industry. “Never did I believe, nor realize, all my work would open such a gateway into the cosmetics industry, especially in salt scrubs,” she said.
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The newly renovated The Reach Key West, Curio Collection by Hilton is proud to welcome our signature oceanfront dining experience, Four Marlins. Four Marlins was named after and inspired by a famous photo of Ernest Hemingway on a fishing trip with his family in Key West. Inspired by tropical island fishing lodges from the 1930s, Four Marlins begins as a sunny breakfast room before transitioning into a relaxed afternoon eatery, happy hour hot spot for locals and guests alike, and finally, a contemporary dining room. The menu highlights locally sourced ingredients, from seasonal raw bar selections and the daily catch to steaks and prime cuts, and can be enjoyed in the dining room or on the terrace with scenic views of the Atlantic. Four Marlins bar features an extensive selection of rums and spirits celebrating the Caribbean and Latin America, as well as an impressive selection of wines and draught beer.

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Stoky manages the manufacturing process, conducted out of two beautifully customized shipping containers in Key Largo, while Maddison handles virtually everything else. They met over a decade ago while Maddison was tending bar at Marker 88 in Islamorada, one of Stoky’s former restaurants, and the two got to know each other through various product sales.

Maddison has not only taken marketing to a new level, she’s taken great pride in this being a Keys-manufactured product from top to bottom.

“Our scrub is made right here in Key Largo. The employees who work for us live and work here and spend their earnings in the Keys. I use all local businesses for design, printing, website development and much more. We are truly a ‘Made in the Keys’ business,” she said.

They ship as far away as the Netherlands, South America and Europe. Not only that, The Keys Salt Scrub has earned a five-star rating on Amazon and is ranked in the top 100 out of thousands of salt scrubs Amazon sells.

Maddison is meticulous about her packaging, including how the color-coordinated ribbon is tied on the wooden spoons she affixes to each jar and where the labels are positioned. And while product quality is important (the scrub has a shelf life that exceeds a year, far more than her competitors), attention to product presentation occupies much of her non-traveling hours.

Maddison is a people-pleaser and doesn’t generally take no for an answer. She says that becoming a successful entrepreneur especially in the Keys, which wasn’t in her original life plan, is the only way she’s comfortable running this business.

They employ six full-time employees who do all the mixing, labeling and packing in the modest Key Largo production facility. She relies heavily on herself to get the rest of the job done. “Normally I have a sales representative and perhaps I should have an office manager, but that would separate me from parts of the business I really enjoy,” she said. “Besides, who am I going to get to manage ME!”

Laura Maddison is truly someone who has transformed her salty passion into one successful local business.
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Decked in a lime-colored chef’s toque and togs outside of his shop on the corner of Elizabeth and Green streets, Kermit Carpenter playfully mimes invisible pie-in-your-face theatrics with those passing by. A fixture and a feature of Key West’s historic seaport for more than 25 years, the scene is as synonymous with Key West’s Key lime pie as the iconic pie is to the Keys itself.

In the early days of Kermit’s Key West Key Lime Shoppe, his togs and toque went well beyond what might now seem like a costume for clever marketing. For the first six years, he’d hit the shop’s small kitchen tucked just beyond the koi pond and put them into action, making his now-famous pies and inventing countless concoctions. The key ingredient? Fresh Key limes, of course — the same juice used by islanders to add flavor to fish, turtle steaks and conch long ago and to “cook” eggs and condensed milk into a sweet and tangy pie filling.

No stranger to retail, Carpenter thawed out and got his tropical business feet wet with a small store on Duval Street selling smoothies and ice cream after 20 years as a buyer and manager of a department store in Maryland. In 1992, about the time the city bought the Key West Bight to prevent developers from sealing off access to the waterfront, he was offered the 200 Elizabeth St. space as a rental. As the old adage goes, location is everything, and with his sister’s support and stellar advice of keeping to a theme, the rest, they say, is history.

Carpenter’s Key lime empire now includes three locations and more than 150 products to satisfy every kind of Key lime fanatic: candies, fudge, and cookies; marinades, dressings, jams and jellies; body products and cosmetics; rubs and relishes and more. His best-selling to date? Frozen Key Lime Pie on a Stick — a frozen portable pie triangle of tart and sweet creaminess wrapped in a shell of Belgian chocolate. They sell nearly 200,000 a year, or an average of more than 500 daily. That’s a lot of pie!

And a lot of Key limes. If you’ve ever tried to squeeze your own, you know it’s no small feat to extract just a little bit of juice. And forget finding enough to churn out 400 pies a day to meet the shop’s walk-in demand, especially considering that Kermit’s “pucker-perfect” recipe boasts nearly double-strength juice to most others. As irony would have it, Key limes are not copious in the Keys, so while they do squeeze what’s needed for their marmalades and relishes, it’s an ingredient they outsource while insisting on pure, fresh Key limes and not a cheaper citrus mixture.
Of all the Key lime products he sells, more than 85% of them are made in-house, and more than half are his inventions. But Kermit is quick to share the accolades with his staff of nearly 60 employees, which includes his sister Anita and brother-in-law John Meyer, family as well as business partners, who manage the ever-expanding brand’s production facility in DeLand, in Central Florida, where space is prolific and doesn’t come at a premium.

“Every other week, we’re pushing ideas back and forth, taste-testing between the staff,” he says, unwrapping two jars of jam labeled “A” and “B” and with mango, Key lime and pineapple as the featured ingredients. “The best ideas come from looking around at what others are doing, and always being open to change.”

After a small forkful, “B” is declared the winner, noted for its smoother texture and subtle tang as opposed to its tart and chunky counterpart. Though one could say it’s all a matter of taste, as is what the “proper” Key lime pie topping — merengue or whipped cream — should be.

“There are two distinct schools of thought, as opposed to right and wrong,” says Sales and Marketing Director Karen Haught of the age-old debate.

TOP: Kermit is just as comfortable in the baking area as he is on Elizabeth St. He is also quick to share the accolades of his success with his staff of nearly 60 employees.

RIGHT: Shoppers can’t help but be amazed by the 150 Key lime products that Kermit’s sells to satisfy every kind of fanatic, from candies and fudge to cookies, jams and jellies.
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Kermit’s classic Key Lime pie is based on the recipe his grandmother, Emma, was taught to make by Key West locals in the 1950s, which she in turn taught him to make during a Key West visit during his 1959 winter school break. It features a traditional graham-cracker crust and a creamy filling that is light, fluffy and tangfully delicious. Their topping? Fluffy whipped cream, made on premise.

“But try them all,” he urges. “That’s part of the fun.”

It’s in this spirit that Kermit encourages his customers to try before they buy with samples of all his products available for those who are curious or unsure. Everything they taste, including Kermit’s (non-Key lime) Café breakfast and lunch menu items for purchase, is made from scratch with all-natural ingredients and without chemicals or preservatives — a fact he’s proud to share. Gluten allergies? No problem. They’ve got pies made with gluten-free graham cracker crust, so no one is left out. And new a cookie-drop depositor will add to the homemade baked cookie flavors.

Featured on the “Today Show,” “Good Morning America,” HGTV, Travel Channel, New York Times, National Geographic’s 500 Food Journeys of a Lifetime and named a Top 10 Dessert in America by the Food Network, it’s clear that Kermit’s Key West Key Lime Shoppe is a must-stop for anyone who makes the Key lime treat part of their pie-itinerary and craves a taste of made-in-the-Keys goodness.

Visit keylimeshop.com to see a full array of the shop’s sublime products. And stop in at 200 Elizabeth St. and 431 Front St. or visit their facility and showroom at 1842 Patterson Ave. #8 in Deland, Florida.
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When one thinks of the treats the Keys traditionally supply, thoughts almost always waft toward Key lime pie. After all, in 2006 the Key lime pie was named the official pie of the State of Florida. That’s a heady designation.

But for almost 10 years, Bob and Kristie Thomas at Key Largo Chocolates and Ice Cream have been making locals and visitors forget — at least temporarily — about Key lime pie. Who knew there was a chocolate factory in Key Largo!

For some traveling into the Keys from the mainland, Key Largo Chocolates is a natural stopping point to stretch the legs and feed the soul with the rich decadence of homemade chocolate. For locals, it’s a destination.

Their chocolate comes in all shapes and sizes. The two chocolatiers now turn out turtles, truffles, caramel products, bark, sugar-free candy and a host of creative chocolate molds of seashells, starfish and other nautical treats.

Back in 2007, Bob Thomas was like many, an unfortunate victim of the market collapse and ensuing recession. Bob had been an airline pilot for decades with Eastern, American and Southwest airlines until the recession and a mandatory retirement directive had he and his wife, Kristie, searching for answers.

Fast forward to the fall of 2010. Thomas’ piloting years were mostly behind him and Kristie’s career as a travel agent had waned, so together they decided to be creative and resourceful as to how they’d enjoy their golden years worry-free.

Kristie had been dabbling with making cakes and chocolates in a nautical or seashell motif for friends and family and had gotten raves for the designs, but at that point it was just a hobby. After her daughter asked her to bake her wedding cake, she says “When I made the chocolate shells, that is what really kicked off this business.”
While neither had ever run a retail business, they also decided they weren’t ready to retire either. That became the start of Key Largo Chocolates. The Thomases went for the gold and agreed they’d parlay Kristie’s confectionary talents into a chocolate shop, but only on one condition — they weren’t going to do it partway, they would do it all the way.

A lot of blood, sweat and tears went into forming the business. While Kristie was, and still is, the artist in the family, there was a lot to be learned about producing chocolate in volume. She took courses on chocolate making and studied and learned everything you would want to know about chocolate.

“Kristie was always involved in sewing, painting and cooking,” recalled Bob. “It’s like she leveraged her artistic talents and used them toward running a successful chocolatier business.”

The big learning curve never deterred them. Kristie took a three-month course to learn how to make chocolate but when they learned that tempering chocolate — tough enough just about anywhere else in the world — is even more challenging in the heat and humidity of the Florida Keys, they knew they were in for a lesson.

“We found out why there aren’t any chocolatiers in the Keys”, said Bob.

The goal for the Thomases was always to make high-end chocolate. “It’s like finding a good glass of wine. If you’re willing to spend $12 on a glass of fine wine, it will be a memorable experience,” said Kristie. “We sought the same for our chocolate.”

To accomplish this dream, they needed help from friends and the community, and they received it. Just as they were preparing to build a traditional kitchen, they learned what they needed in chocolate-making is different. Ovens weren’t needed, just a lot of electricity for the tempering machines and several refrigerators to cool it down. They also needed a climate-controlled room, one that always remains at about 65 degrees and 35-40% humidity.

They buy chocolate in bulk — 11-pound blocks — and use that as the base for their many blends. In season, they are producing several hundred pounds of chocolate per week. Ocean Reef, which buys chocolate from them for their turndown service, is one of Key Largo Chocolates’ largest customers.

ABOVE: Bob shows off one of the 11-pound chocolate blocks they use as the base for their many blends. That’s how you produce several hundred pounds of chocolate per week.
Largo Chocolates’ largest commercial accounts. They also supply other local Keys hotels for their housekeeping services or gift shops. Truffles are a popular item with many local hotels. Shell World in Key Largo was their first wholesale customer.

The most important part of the chocolate-making process is the tempering. Tempered chocolate has a shiny, flawless appearance, feels firm and melts smoothly in your mouth. Slowly heating and cooling melted chocolate up to 118 degrees, then cooling it down to 82 degrees, then back up to a working temperature of 89 degrees, while stirring throughout, puts it into temper. If chocolate is not tempered properly, the cocoa butter crystallization is uncontrolled and uneven, which results in an unattractive chocolate. If it doesn’t come out right, you just start the process again.

Kristie is a mad chocolate scientist of sorts. She loves mixing flavors trying to
create new, likeable chocolates. With truffles, she's tasted 45 different truffles from a variety of companies to find the ones best suited for her shop. “We try out different recipes, then we test, test, test” she says. “Precision is a must, because there's no forgiveness when it comes to chocolate.”

She experimented blending Bourbon with bacon and pecans to make a new flavor toffee for Bacon Fest in Islamorada this year. The slow, handmade process involved basting bacon with bourbon, butter and brown sugar, baking it and then crumbling it up into tiny pieces and adding it to the toffee. At Brewfest, she used a 12-pack of Guinness Stout to make a black-and-tan ice cream, and even dabbled with a new sorbet using red wine with raspberries.

Key Largo Chocolates also uses organics to make vegan chocolate and imports their ice cream purees — the base of the flavor — from Italy. Their chocolates make great gifts and can be shipped almost anywhere in the world.

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While there are many ways to experience Key West, those who follow the mysteries of writer Lucy Burdette do so from their armchairs through Hayley Snow. On her silver scooter, Hayley zips through Old Town, somehow managing to “troll for trouble,” as her fiancée puts it, wherever she goes. That a food critic encounters so many dead bodies is a mystery in itself — nonetheless, it seems that crime-solving is all in day’s work for Hayley. Through nine novels in Burdette’s Key West Food Critic Mystery series, Hayley’s pace never lags. Readers relish (pun intended) the discovery of Key West’s landmarks, history and personalities, as well as the recipes for dishes mentioned along the way.

“I want readers to feel like they’re there and to see all the sides of Key West,” says Roberta Isleib, the author behind the pen name Lucy Burdette, “not just what a tourist who comes to Duval Street will see, but all the many layers behind that. Through Hayley, readers are basically seeing what I see, the Key West I know.”

In Isleib’s latest installment, “A Deadly Feast,” Hayley has finally landed Nathan, the man of her dreams, a “ridiculously handsome” detective with the Key West Police Department. They are planning a windswept ceremony on the beach at Fort Zachary Taylor State Park, followed by a reception at the Hemingway House with all the trimmings. But when a woman drops dead at Isle Cook on a food tour that Hayley is covering for Key Zest Magazine, things run amuck. Is the Key lime pie poisoned? Is there a rivalry between ruthless chefs? Will Isleib’s plucky amateur sleuth save the day and her wedding?

“Of course, Hayley Snow has no business solving crimes,” says Isleib. “She’s not in the police. She has no expertise. So, each time, I have to ask myself, ‘What draws her into this?’” In the first book in the series, Hayley was a suspect because her ex’s new girlfriend was offed. But after that, Isleib had to come up with new characters with personal agendas, deftly mixing truth and fiction. Hayley and her family are imagined, but many of the characters are true Key West. Lorenzo, Hayley’s confidante, actually does practice Tarot readings in Mallory Square, but his name is Ron Augustine in real life.

“If it’s somebody that I’m going to have to kill off, those are not real people,” says Isleib. “Usually the murderer is not a real person, either. But most of the restaurants and other settings exist. It’s the same rule of thumb. If something bad is going to happen there, then I make it up. I’m not out to ruin somebody’s business.”
A clinical psychologist, Isleib is more interested “in what makes people tick than in the puzzle” in her mysteries. She spent decades practicing psychotherapy in New Haven in an affiliation with Yale University. However, she hit a wall back in the late 1990s when the “gold standard” for health insurance coverage became crisis management. “Getting paid for the kind of work that I was trained to do — longer term psychotherapy — was very difficult,” says Isleib, who began to cast about for an alternative path, at first publishing articles on the psychology of golf, which she had just taken up.

“I've read mysteries from the beginning,” she says. “As a girl, the Bobbsey Twins and Nancy Drew and the Hardy Boys and all of those were favorites. A friend said, 'well, you should try writing a mystery.'” So, during a period she calls her “mid-life crisis,” Isleib took several fiction courses and pounded out a mystery about a neurotic lady golfer.

That book didn't sell, but it landed her an agent and the interest of an editor at Berkley Prime Crime publishers. The subsequent book that Isleib wrote, Six Strokes Under, launched her five-book Golf Lover's Mystery series in 2002. This was followed by three mysteries in which the sleuth was an advice columnist whose personal life was fraught with issues.

All Isleib’s books fall under a genre called “cozy mysteries,” a term coined in the late 20th century. In a cozy mystery, sex and violence are left off the page, though dead bodies can turn up in proliferation. The setting is always a small community, with friends, family and neighbors in supporting roles. The sleuth is a person much like the reader — a schoolteacher, a gardener, a reporter with a local beat — but never a cop. In the best of the cozies, dedicated readers think they've guessed the solution but find in the end that they are completely surprised.

“You have to have, of course, more than one suspect,” says Isleib. “That doesn’t have to be someone who necessarily would want to kill the person, but maybe they have their own secret that they don’t want to tell.”

The Key West Food Critic Series was launched in 2012. By then Isleib and her husband, John Brady, were residents of Key West, which they “fell for” on a tour of Florida in 2007. “I pitched the series to my editor thinking, well, Key West is just such a perfect location,” says Isleib, “because there’s so many quirky people there and so many stories.” With the publication of the first book in the Key West Food Critic Series, “An Appetite for Murder,” Isleib became Lucy Burdette, in homage to her grandmother whose name she borrowed.

To understand the local scene, Isleib took the Key West Citizens Police Academy course and also enrolled in the Ambassadors program, “which was fun.” But for advice on specifics, she relies on Key West Police Chaplain and Reserve Officer Steve Torrence, who always appears in her mysteries as himself. “He gets a kick out of it,” says Isleib. “I ask him, ‘Would they do
this? What would happen next? He’ll read the book and say, ‘I need more character development.’ Or, ‘In the next one, I want to be more buff.’"

The further into the series Isleib gets, the more Key Westers want to be included and end up as interesting characters. Analise Smith, a Key West tour guide, and Martha Hubbard, Isle Cook’s chef, both play pivotal roles in “A Deadly Feast,” contributing some of their own real-life experiences. Hubbard also shared her recipes for Chef Martha’s Sponger Key Lime Pie and Strawberries and Lime Sponge Cake Wedding Trifle, which (spoiler alert) she brings to serve at Hayley’s and Nathan’s wedding party.

Isleib keeps in close contact with her readers through Facebook and Instagram, as well as through her blogs — Mystery Lovers Kitchen and Jungle Red Writers — which she maintains with fellow authors. Readers are rarely shy about voicing their opinions. Early in the series, Hayley had a different boyfriend. “One woman wrote, ‘This is ridiculous. There is absolutely nothing between them,” reports Isleib. “ ‘If you continue with him as her boyfriend, I’m quitting the series.’ I thought about that, and I said, ‘You know what? She’s right. There’s nothing between them, so let’s move on.’”

In recent mysteries, Isleib has branched out into topical issues, which not all readers wholeheartedly accept. “A Deadly Feast” has a #metoo story. In “Death on the Menu,” Hayley covers a crucial Cuban/American delegation meeting at the Harry S Truman Little White House for Key Zest Magazine — a plot that came about after the boat Isleib’s sister took back from the Dry Tortugas ended up rescuing a group of Cuban refugees. “Some people complained because I had President Obama come to the Little White House,” says Isleib. “They would rather not know that I have political opinions.”

Through Crooked Lane Books, which published “Death on the Menu” and “A Deadly Feast,” Isleib will release “Key Lime Crime” in July 2020, in which Hayley finds a corpse when she takes her overbearing mother-in-law on the Conch Train tour. In her next book, now in the works, Hayley and Nathan take a delayed honeymoon to Scotland, where things get sticky. You can take the girl out of Key West, but you can’t take Key West out of the girl. In that book, she’ll be communicating with her friends and family through FaceTime.
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