HAWKS CAY CHEF OF THE YEAR

Whale Harbor Reborn

BILL LAY’S DINING EMPIRE

KEY WEST FOOD TOUR

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ABOVE: Southernmost Food Tasting & Cultural Walking Tour.
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to the depths of our ocean
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ABOUT THE COVER
Chef Bill Lay, who has built quite a dining empire in Key West, is most comfortable working in his restaurants among his 114 employees. See the full story on page 8.
Thank You to Our Staff

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“The two most important days in your life,” opined Mark Twain, “are the day you are born and the day you find out why.” Bill Lay was just a freshman in high school when he read that quote, but the words stuck with him, leaving a lasting impression.

“I thought, ‘wow, that’s pretty deep, I better figure this out,’” says Lay. But it wasn’t until a few years later that it came together. “I was 20 or 21, bartending and managing in my first full-time job at a place called McKenzies in Hoboken, N. J. I absolutely loved the social aspect of the work. I met so many people, some of whom I’m still friends with to this day.”

Nearly 30 years later, Lay is the chef and owner with his wife, Amy, of a veritable dining empire in Key West, which includes La Trattoria Old Town and La Trattoria Oceanside, Virgilio’s Martini Bar, Benihana, and a soup-to-nuts event outfit called Catered Affairs. Twain’s words are emblazoned under the photo of a beaming Bill “Papi” Lay on his website, where he emphasizes that a focus on customers (“service, service, service”) is still his mantra.

“I tell everybody on my staff, when people walk in, make them feel comfortable, like you’ve invited them over to a party and they’re walking into your living room,” says Lay, a father figure to his family of 114 employees, on whom he’s bestowed nicknames such as Fierce and Champ. “Yes, the economics matter, but that’s not our focus. Our main focus is that you have a great time, which is far more important than the dollar we make in profit.” High season and low, the restaurants are packed. La Trattoria customers come for the traditional Italian entrees — veal parmigiana, ossobuco, and chicken Marsala — as well as the pasta dishes, the Penne Venezia and the Tortellini Virgilio, in particular. But, “if you want a puttanesca, we’ll make it for you. Of course we will, because we have everything here,” says Lay, a big bear of a man with wry sense of humor. “When I’m in the kitchen, guests will say, ‘Just tell Bill to make me something. Make sure it’s not in this book,’” he says, waving at the menu.

Italian essentials withstanding, the emphasis is on fresh ingredients. “And we’re not afraid to take little gambles. I did a Cajun butter skirt steak not too long ago, and we did a tomahawk veal chop with a Marsala cream sauce this Valentine’s Day,” says Lay. “We like to look at what can be done with fresh, local seafood here.” Lay’s invention, the Pesce Locale — fresh hogfish sautéed and topped with artichoke hearts and spinach in a garlic cream sauce — has turned into a menu staple. Their wines are sourced internationally.

Surely, Lay came by his passion for cooking through family? “No. My mother couldn’t boil water,” he remembers, chuckling fondly. His mother and father — who fled Cuba after Castro seized power
in 1959 — were “the greatest parents on the planet,” by his reckoning. They settled first in Queens, where Lay was born, later moving to Hoboken. That Lay, a Cuban-American, grew up to become a chef specializing in Italian food is an irony not lost on him. “The thing is Hoboken was so diverse,” he explains. “You had a little bit of everything — Italian people on the block, Cuban people, Indian, Russian. But it was very, very Italian, so I grew up eating Italian food,” though he happily remembers making ham croquetas, a Cuban specialty, with his grandmother. “I would help her roll them up with ham and thicken the cream,” he remembers. “How did you do that? How did you make that? What’s that flavor?”, I was always asking when she cooked, and she was always telling me little things. Later, when I worked at McKenzies, I started jumping into the kitchen just to learn.”

Still, Lay’s career path did not follow a straight line. Out of high school, he was seized with the idea of design and majored in architecture at the New York Institute of Technology. But the siren call of restaurant work beckoned. After McKenzies and a stint on the West Coast, Lay ended up in Miami bartending at Monty’s Raw Bar, where the chef, Ken Baker, took him on. “Kenny broke things down for me and gave me the foundation,” says Lay, “but I always tried to stay semi-Italian.”

Lay had set his sights beyond bartending. At Monty’s, “I told them, ‘Just to let you know, because I believe in communication, I’m in the market for a management position,”
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so I’m going to eventually leave if I find something.” Impressed by his work ethic and design background, the owner locked him into a job opening new restaurants for the chain nationwide. After a launch in Atlanta, Lay was sent to open a restaurant in Key West (where Dante’s now stands). Our island paradise came as, well, an unpleasant surprise.

“I had people showing up hung over as hell or not performing the work at all,” remembers Lay, “I remember, specifically, an electrician who took about four hours to hang three light fixtures.” Lay counted the days until he could leave until a guy named Kevin Leroux, then owner of US 1 Radio, ambled along. “Kevin said, ‘This town is fantastic, and I know your personality, and that you are not liking this town is confusing to me.’” Leroux offered to show him around during Fantasy Fest, and two weeks of dedicated bar-hopping followed.

That year, 1998, Hurricane Georges struck, “which opened my eyes to the genuineness of the people here,” says Lay. It reminded him of his childhood in Hoboken, “a small town, where everyone helps everybody and is concerned about the community.” He “immediately” fell in love with this “two by four island.”

Lay stayed on in Key West opening another concept restaurant, now gone. In 2005, he bought Irish Kevin’s Bar on Duval, though he sold his interest in the partnership the next year to buy La Trattoria Old Town and Virgilio’s. But it was at Irish Kevin’s that Lay met his wife, Amy Linzey, now his Executive Vice President in charge of their catering company. “It was my idea, my concept, my vision,” says Lay, but she’s the one who took Catered Affairs to where it is today” — that is, Key West’s go-to event outfit for weddings and corporate parties.

“I’m a ‘what’s next,’ kind of guy,” says Lay, who in 2018 swept up the iconic Japanese sushi and steakhouse franchise Benihana on South Roosevelt, next door to La Trattoria Oceanside (which he started in 2011 at the former Martha’s site). He is the proud inventor of Virgilio’s wildly popular Martini Mondays. And, let’s face it, “where else can you get a martini for $7,” in a thirsty town? But Bill Lay’s lasting legacy will be his community service.

He joined the board of the Key West Chamber of Commerce in 2018, concerned about job creation. He co-chairs its annual golf fundraiser. He was recently voted onto the board of the Military Affairs Committee (MAC), which provides a liaison between and civilians and members of the military new to town. “I never served,” he says, “which I regret, so this is how I give back at this stage in my life.”

Perhaps most famously, Lay stayed on in Key West during Hurricane Irma in 2017, providing first responders with free, hot meals out of his warehouse behind La Trattoria Oceanside. He became the voice of an evacuated Key West, reporting for Fox News live in the days before the hurricane landed.

“I literally have a deep affection for the people here, who are some of the nicest people that I’ve ever known in my life,” says Lay. “I met my wife here. Key West has given so much to me and my family. I’ll do all can to contribute to this town.”

Below: (Left to right): At Bill and Amy Lay’s wedding, one of the local personalities was drag queen Inga, who sported a wedding dress of her own, just to add a little more Key West flavor to the celebration. Bill Lay is almost larger than life when it comes to Key West dining, and his advertising on a Key West trolley is testament to that.

Bottom: Bill Lay, who is owner and chef of four restaurants in Key West along with an event company, always has a smile on his face.
Key West Garden Club

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William Ryan, executive chef at Hawks Cay Resort, was named “Chef of the Year” by the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association (FRLA) during the organization’s Hospitality Stars of the Industry Gala in 2019. And while that accomplishment is noteworthy enough, it’s what he’s done with food and revitalizing the resort that’s just as important.

Ryan has taken the reigns of all the resort restaurants and established a culture of excellence. His leadership, vision and service are just plain exemplary.

“No one is more deserving of the Chef of the Year award than Chef Ryan,” said Hawks Cay Resort Vice President and Managing Director Sheldon Suga. “From successfully building a team from the ground up for our Angler & Ale restaurant to reimagining all six of our culinary outlets after Hurricane Irma, Chef Ryan has set the standard for what we look for in a crew member and we’re honored to have him as a part of the Hawks Cay community.”

Ryan has traveled far and wide, starting with being born and raised in Akron, Ohio, and then making stops in Detroit, Buffalo and New Jersey early on. “My father worked for J.C. Penney and his job was to travel to different stores to help them improve sales, so we moved a lot,” said Ryan.

His first job in the food industry was at 16, doing food prep at a Greek restaurant. “I cooked chicken livers with onions, prepped the salad bar and put in 50 hours a week while attending school. I worked until 11:00 PM most nights and loved every minute of it,” he recalled.

He particularly loved “the flames on the stove on busy nights” as well as the excitement and chaos on those nights when the kitchen was humming. “It was like the floor of the N.Y. Stock Exchange” in terms of the frenetic pace, “but everyone knew what to do to make it work,” he said.

LEFT: The elegance of 61 Prime at Hawks Cay Resort is largely due to the vision and commitment of Chef Bill Ryan.

OPPOSITE PAGE: With over 30 years in cooking and restaurant management, Chef Bill Ryan has taken the reigns of all the Hawks Cay restaurants and established a culture of excellence.
After high school he attended the New England Culinary Institute and made his way to line cook at a French restaurant called Pauline's. Eventually he worked his way up to chef. He won the first of many awards while there, winning the Silver medal in an American Culinary Federation competition. Winning awards became a theme for him and exemplified his creative and competitive spirit.

“That competitive spirit fuels my cooking,” says Ryan.

At one of his stops while at The Westin Hilton Head Island Resort & Spa, S.C., he attended the Bill Clinton Global initiative in New York City for a weeklong annual event and was able to work with and for an amazing array of food professionals.

But it was his time in St. Lucia in the West Indies that Ryan really expanded and perfected his cooking skills. There, all the food that was served had to be sourced from the island, allowing him the opportunity to work with fresh fish, indigenous fruits and vegetables.

While there, he won the very prestigious and rigorous Wine Spectator Award of Excellence, which propelled him to make his way to the Florida Keys.

At Hawks Cay, he oversees six restaurants as executive chef, with one banquet chef and two restaurant chefs reporting to him. He spends most of his time at the new Sixty-One Prime restaurant at the resort, which was called Alma before Hurricane Irma did extensive damage to the resort. It took more than a year for Sixty-One Prime to open because of all the work that needed to go into the design, menu development and hiring that took place after the storm.

When asked why the name Sixty-One Prime, Ryan smiled and said, “Well, it’s located at MM 61, so it seemed appropriate.”

Ryan is very proud of the restaurant’s beef, which is sourced from Clewiston on the southwest coast of Florida. He’s particularly proud of the Wagu beef he procures from the McCoy Ranch in Fort McCoy, Marion county.

Local fish is also on the menu, like cobia, yellowtail snapper and swordfish. He is zoned in on ‘micro-greens’, a combination of herbs, flowers, petals and greens that he gets from Odessa, FL.

Today, some of Sixty-One Prime’s signature dishes include Wagu Beef Carpaccio, which
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A true leader, Bill Ryan mentors an average of 10 international interns every year who train with him to develop their own culinary skills.
is paper thin beef with capers, microgreens, radish and mustard aioli. He uses a smoking gun to add to the flavor. He says octopus is very popular too, but he really grabbed our attention when describing his Toy Box Tomato Salad, which is made with mozzarella balls. “We also make a mozzarella ice cream” he revealed.

Ryan lives on Duck Key with his wife of 30 years. She is involved with food and beverage and has been by his side literally and figuratively for that entire time, having often worked together at the same properties.

It’s clear that Executive Chef William Ryan’s more than 30 years of vast culinary experience in various parts of the world has served him and his employers well. A true leader, Ryan mentors an average of ten international interns every year who train with him to develop their own culinary skills. Several of those young interns have gone on to work for him directly.

“It is a tremendous honor to be named the Florida Restaurant and Lodging Association’s Chef of the Year,” said Chef Ryan. “This award is a true testament to my commitment to delivering culinary excellence and I could not have accomplished this without my crew at Hawks Cay.”
Seaside eateries at

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WAHOO’S - SEAFOOD BUFFET - SAND BAR - HOG HEAVEN; ISLAMORADA

With four unique seaside restaurants and rooftop bar, a private beach, 27 fabulous fishing charters plus jet ski rentals, fun things are happening — night and day — at Whale Harbor Marina. What a sensation of a destination!

Sporting a 50-year reputation for delighting locals and vacationers, genuine hospitality runs deep in all directions. Home to Wahoo’s Bar and Grill, the Sand Bar, “World Famous” Seafood Buffet, and Hog Heaven Sports Bar, this colorful complex has something for everyone — in every age group.

Located on the southern end of Whale Harbor Channel and Bridge in Islamorada, the view here is amazing everywhere you turn. Plan to take lots of photos. By the way, the on-premise lighthouse is a perfect backdrop for selfies and upbeat group shots, too.

When it comes to culinary visuals, feast your eyes on spectacular menu creations from Chef Karina Picado and her team. Entrees feature only the freshest ingredients, perfectly prepared and beautifully presented. The result? An impressive number of loyal “regulars” frequent the restaurant — a sure indication you’ve come to the right place.

The iconic Seafood Buffet offers more than 40 top-of-the-line items including awesome home-made bisques and chowders, a London broil carving station, and pasta stir-fry station with more than 20 flavorful accompaniments. The salad bar has everything from ceviches, octopus, and crab Louis, to fresh tuna, and more. Of course, the spotlight is on the Raw Bar where snow crab legs, fresh oysters, and two types of peel-and-eat shrimp take center stage — all for the scene-stealing price of just $34.95 per person.
The aptly named Sand Bar is a popular rooftop restaurant and gathering spot located directly above the Seafood Buffet. Be sure to check out the seafood-inspired menu and enjoy karaoke nights under the stars. Each Friday and Saturday, the Sand Bar features live bands.

Above all, don’t miss the festive Full Moon parties. Each month, General Manager Troy Sutter and his dedicated staff pull out all the stops to create a lunar celebration benefiting a local charity or non-profit organization.

Said Sutter, “In February, we had a Snow Moon, so I brought in a snow-making machine.” The Super Moon in March gave a sensational nod to Superman.
If you get the impression Sutter has the passion and skill to create fun-filled events, how right you are! Truth be told, he is nothing short of a force of nature. With a warm smile, Sutter emphasized, “I’m big on promotions.”

Although relatively new to Whale Harbor, Sutter comes to the table with a wealth of experience and enthusiasm. In addition to opening a half dozen restaurants in the Ft. Lauderdale area over the years, he also has successfully established enterprises in Barcelona and Amsterdam.

Since arriving in the Keys two months ago, he has energized virtually every aspect of the Whale Harbor dining experience. A firm believer in cross-promotions, Sutter works closely with area hotels, encouraging guests to include visits to the marina complex to their vacation itineraries.

“Our upcoming Pink Moon party is already setting up to be the party of the year,” he said, adding, “We’re teaming up with the Cancer Society and local organizations to make this a must-see event.” Plans for the April 7th fiesta include bathing the entire building in pink lighting — including outlines of glowing pink rope.

In keeping with the theme, Sutter also concocted a special ‘pink-inspired’ cocktail: Cotton Candy. He graciously gave credit to Bacardi rum for ongoing support. “Bacardi International generously sponsors our events and contributes with our Bacardi VIP ocean-front lounge and all the sponsored cocktails,” he said.

Decidedly proud of Whale Harbor Restaurant Group’s reputation for “giving back,” Sutter advised the complex is fully dedicated to serving the community. He shared that when Hurricane Irma hit in 2017, the Seafood Buffet immediately went into full generator power mode in order to provide first responders with free meals. Local residents in need were accommodated, as well.

Today, with post-storm renovations now complete, the sprawling facility is more appealing and vibrant than ever before.
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In addition to Wahoo’s, Seafood Buffet, and Sand Bar, THE casual dining is literally in Hog Heaven where Chef Eric Countrymen serves up what Sutter refers to as, “arguably the best BBQ menu items that you will taste in the Keys.” Hog Heaven has several pool tables as well as an intriguing outdoor lagoon-patio dining and entertaining area. On weekends, DJs and live bands play until 4 a.m.

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Restaurant hours are 11 a.m. to 10 p.m. seven days a week. For additional information, visit whaleharborrestaurant.com.

BELOW: Hog Heaven is where Chef Eric Countrymen serves up what many consider the best BBQ menu items that you will taste in the Keys.
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In a town filled with tours-aplenty, none tempt the taste buds quite like Key West Food Tours, a 3-hour educational walking nosh and tasty revelation of the island's rich history. Founded by Analise Smith in 2014 to offer island visitors authentic local culinary experiences paired with anecdotal entertainment, the tours continually top TripAdvisor in the #1 spot for “Food and Drink” and garner an annual “Certificate of Excellence.” Keys Style caught up with the 33-year-old Conch to talk about some of the secret ingredients to her success, including a love of food, her Cuban grandmother’s Key West kitchen, and a desire to deliver visitors a better connection to the city, one taste and tale at a time.

WHAT ARE SOME FOODS THAT INFLUENCED YOU AND YOUR FAMILY AS YOU GREW UP?

Food was a big, big part of my childhood. Even when I’d sleep over someone’s house, my mother and grandmother would ask, “What did you eat?” They needed the full rundown. I have a strong memory of when I was little — 7 or 8 — and my grandmother making a Lobster Enchilada — a spiny lobster with tomato sauce dish. I hated it. I had rice and beans with every single meal growing up. By high school, I was on a rice and beans protest. But then I went to college and came back saying, “I miss the rice and beans,
please feed me the rice and beans.” Lobster Enchilada is now a contender for my last meal. Sometimes on a Sunday, my mom would make a full-blown southern meal, as taught by my dad’s mom. My mom made sure she spent time in her Alabama kitchen with her because she wanted to make sure she could make those foods for my dad. That's the only way. You had to be there for the oral recipes or that's it, it’s lost. Dictation is difficult for them. One time I went to my grandmothers to get a recipe for the Palomilla steak I wanted to make in college. She wrote “fry, simmer, and cut.” Three words, underlined. We still joke about it today. As far as my grandmother’s recipes go, a lot are classic Cuban recipes, so it’s not that they need to be written down; I can make them. But take white rice — it’s very simple to make; you don’t need a recipe. My mother makes good white rice, but it doesn’t come close to my grandmother’s. We don’t know how or why. There’s something’s magical in her kitchen. Some people have the Midas touch, and as much as you try to get close to what they're doing, it’s not going to be the same.

WHAT IS THE FIRST FOOD YOU REMEMBER COOKING OR BEING EXCITED ABOUT AS A KID?

It’s so cliché to say Key lime pie, but it’s the truth. I remember my mom making the merengue. She still makes it, with merengue. I would say all Key West locals having Key lime pie are on the merengue-side of the debate. There’s a history there, too. When housewives in the 1800s were making the pie, they were separating the egg yolks from the whites, and they weren’t going to waste it. My mom taught me; my grandmother taught me. But I wasn’t really interested in cooking;
more so wanting to be in the kitchen with them. Today, I live two blocks away from my grandmother, and four blocks away from my mother. My grandmother just turned 89. There are days when she’ll call my 67-year-old mother and say, “I made dinner and you need to come and pick up this food.” My mother does the same thing — “I have food for you.” The whole idea of food is so deeply rooted in who people are, especially women across the world. With Latin women, it’s just ingrained in them. This is what you do, all day, every day — prepare meals for your family. But food is so much more than what’s on your plate. It brings people together.

WOULD YOU CALL YOURSELF A “FOODIE”?

The majority of the people on the planet are foodies in the sense that they like to eat good food. Then there are people that eat to live, eat only as means to surviving. But there are a lot of people who live to eat. While food in general is a big part of who I am, I wouldn’t call myself a foodie. I’m more of a food critic. But I do love food. Food strikes a chord with people and invokes so many different memories — you remember your mom’s cooking, your favorite food as a child. Food serves as a memory. This is what I want to curate with my tours, and what I want for a visitor who comes to Key West.

ABOVE: The combination of food tasting and touring, like “The Hemingway Experience” gives patrons a food and drink tour created around the author, with a guided tour of the museum plus other stops.

LEFT: During a recent Seafood Tasting Tour, Smith delivered the “goods”, in the form of our very own, Key West ‘pinks’.
HOW DO YOU CHOOSE THE ESTABLISHMENTS THAT ARE PART OF YOUR TOURS?

Originally, I wanted it to be “Cooking with Nona”—cooking with the matriarch of the family. In this case, a cooking class with MY grandmother to show people how to make traditional Cuban food and mojitos. But there were regulation hurdles from the City. And because my grandmother’s older, she might one day just say, “Everyone get out of my house!” I organically came up with the idea of food tours before I realized that it was done all over the world. Then my mother and I drove up to Miami to take a food tour, and I was like, “I can do this!” Cuban food, Caribbean, and Conch flavors—I was trying to recreate that experience that we were going to have in my grandmother’s kitchen. Turns out that that’s what people want—to try regional food. So that’s a precursor—the food needs to be good and it needs to represent Key West. We’ll gladly recommend other restaurants that serve non-regional cuisine, but that’s not something we will feature on our tour. There are also people who come on the tour who want to have a cultural experience, where they get to go into the local restaurants that have been there for generations and feel connected on a deeper level. We have over 300 restaurants on this two-by-four-mile island, and we’ve picked the best of the crop to offer a taste of that in three hours.

IF YOU COULD SHARE A MEAL WITH ANY HISTORICAL KEYS FIGURE, WHO WOULD IT BE AND WHY?

The first person who comes to mind is the “Banana Bread Man,” a gentleman named Frank Baing. He’s on a bike in the mural at “In One Era” on Petronia Street across from Blue Heaven. In the 50s and 60s, he’d ride all over Key West yelling out, “Banana bread, get your banana bread!” with the smell of it wafting in the air. He passed away in the 70s. I always wanted to try his banana bread, and he probably had a lot of stories to share because he went all over the island selling his bread and knew a lot of people.
DO YOU HAVE ANYTHING NEW YOU’RE “COOKING UP?”
We have a new tour we just launched — “The Hemingway Experience.” It’s a food and drink tour created around Hemingway, with a guided tour of the museum, tastings at El Meson de Pepe, talk about his time in Cuba, a visit to his favorite watering hole Sloppy Joes for a Papa Double, the Hemingway daiquiri, and then end with rum tasting and Key lime pie at Pilar’s Rum.

WHAT DO YOU LOVE BEST ABOUT WHAT YOU’VE CREATED WITH YOUR TOURS?
The guides who just love what they do. To be able to have a small group of people and show them Key West and feed them — you feel like you are the host of a dinner party. The guests, too, are amazing. They want a new food experience. People who are open to trying new foods are just open-minded in general. So, we’re lucky.

Smith’s food tours have been featured in Forbes, New York Times, Travel & Leisure, and Food & Wine, and have a variety of tours to offer. Visit keywestfoodtours.com or call 305-570-2010 for more information and booking.
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