

The Story of Seafare Restaurant

As a boy, Sam Karos dreamed of immigrating to America where his grandfather was raised. In the early 1980's he and his wife, Athina, and their two young children made that journey and arrived with here \$250 in his pocket and the American Dream.

Finding work with relatives who operated restaurants in Virginia gave the Karoses their first taste of restaurant operations. Sam cooked and washed dishes, while Athina made pastries. Eventually, Sam and Athina came to work for Captain George's seafood restaurant in Williamsburg. It was that experience that inspired the Karoses to work toward owning their own seafood restaurant in the fast growing travel destination of Myrtle Beach, SC.

In 1988 Sam and Athina Karos opened the Outer Banks Restaurant in Murrells Inlet, bringing the first upscale seafood buffet to the Myrtle Beach area. On September 21st of 1989 Hurricane Hugo completely destroyed the Outer Banks, but not the Karos's dream.

Once they found their bearings, Sam and Athina decided to move a mile north into one of the few remaining undamaged buildings in Murrells Inlet. Starting fresh, the Karoses decided on a new name - Seafare. They reopened two months later on November 21, 1989.

Seafare enjoyed tremendous growth over the years and in 2000 a second location was opened in Surfside Beach. In 2004 the Surfside Beach restaurant was completely renovated and the original location closed for good.

Sam and Athina decided to retire in 2005, selling the concept to their son, Stephen. Now Stephen and his wife, Nicole, operate one of the most unique and long-standing restaurants on the Grand Strand.

Seafare has continually been at the forefront of buffet restaurants in the Myrtle Beach area for nearly 20 years bringing families together for an unforgettable dining experience.



Seafare in the Community

For almost twenty years, the Karos family and Seafare Restaurant have been bringing families together with a delicious gourmet seafood buffet. Visitors and Grand Strand locals will attest to the unique experience that is Seafare.

Carrying on a tradition of service and generosity to the community came naturally to Stephen and Nicole Karos. Stephen's parents always considered their customers and the community to be part of their extended family and treated them as such, contributing where they could to local causes and organizations.

The Waccamaw Youth Center in Conway serves at risk male teens with a history of neglect and abuse by providing spiritual fulfillment, educational services, and mental health counseling as well as room and board. Once each month, Seafare hosts all the residents of the center for dinner, treating the young men not only to a delicious seafood buffet but allowing them time away to enjoy a fun evening socializing with each other. Stephen and Nicole enjoy visiting with the group and catching up on progress made since their last dinner. The entire Seafare crew also comes together to contribute to the center. Employees collect school supplies, canned goods, toiletries and paper goods, anything that can fulfill a need. The Karoses also serve on the executive board of the center and help with individual fundraisers throughout the year.

"Jason's House", a mission supported by Surfside United Methodist Church and area businesses, gives free vacations to families burdened by the care of a child with life-threatening cancer. Families who most need to escape from their routine and enjoy the beach are identified by doctors, nurses and social workers at hospitals in four Southeastern states. Approximately 65 families come each summer to enjoy a week's respite from the tough realities back home. The Karoses and Seafare Restaurant proudly contribute meals each year to "Jason's House" in hopes of providing not only a delicious meal, but a night of family togetherness filled with pirates and mermaids that will be remembered for a lifetime.

The Surfside Area Rotary Club has a long history of service to the community through Wright Flight, Beach Sweep and the Thanksgiving Day Meal Program. Celebrating his sixth year as a Surfside Rotarian, Stephen Karos also serves as club treasurer and president-elect for the upcoming year.

For twenty years, the Karos family and Seafare crew have provided the first upscale seafood buffet on the Grand Strand and have contributed to their community along the way. Their longevity and success can be measured not only in the years they have served, but in the friends they have made.



As Seen in the Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC) on October 8, 2000

TWO BY SEA

Not bad for a young couple who came to Virginia with two young children in the 1980s and decided to take a chance on the American dream.

"Always my dream was to come to this country and one day I said I was going to go for the big dream," Sam said. " We came to this country with \$250 in the pocket. We walked from job to job. We had no cars." Because his grandfather had grown up in the United States, Sam had always been attracted to the idea of emigrating. Relatives who operated a diner and a steakhouse in Virginia gave the couple their introduction to the restaurant business, American style.

Sam cooked and washed dishes while Athina worked as a pastry chef. They were introduced to the seafood business when they started working for Captain George's seafood restaurant in Williamsburg, Va. a chain which recently moved into the Myrtle Beach market. Soon they were inspired with ideas of their own for a seafood restaurant in what had become a favorite vacation spot: Myrtle Beach.

Seafare Restaurant opened in November, 1989 just a couple of months after Hurrican Hugo barrelled into the S.C. coast.

"It was the first time for us to see a hurricane," Athina said.

Sam said he has learned to learn to live with the tropical hijinks that regularly plague his adopted home. "I live in this area, I love it, so I learned to live with that," he said. As with many businesses, getting started wasn't easy.

"The first year was very, very difficult," Sam said. "It took us about three years to establish, but from the day we opened, we've been increasing 15 to 20 percent every year."

Eighty-five percent of his business now is repeat business, Sam said. It isn't unusual to find customers lining the deck of the nautical-themed restaurant in summertime, or grouped in the bar waiting to be seated.

Since 1989, the 12,000-square-foot restaurant has been expanded six times and has gone from 250 to 455 seats. A portion of the restaurant wraps around an ancient live oak on the property at the corner of U.S. 17 Business and Sunnyside Avenue in Murrells Inlet.

Kitchen manager Arthur Duncan has worked at Seafare since it opened. He remembers when the owners' youngest children played in a playpen at the restaurant.

"I was a kid, too, when I walked through that door," Duncan said.

“He's like a brother to me and Athina,” Sam said. “This guy never gives up. He's always here.”

The 30-year-old kitchen manager said preparing enough food for the Seafare buffet is a challenge.

“Every day you want to beat the challenge,” Duncan said.

This year, Sam and Athina decided it was time to expand their venture. A new Seafare Restaurant near the corner of U.S. 17 and S.C. 544, formerly the Sand Dollars gaming parlor, opened in August and seats 350 people around the 120-item seafood buffet. The gaming parlor has been transformed by the wooden hull of an old shrimp trawler, cast nets, crab pots and other nautical items.

Sam said he feared the second restaurant might take business away from the original Murrells Inlet location, but August business at the original location increased over the same period in 1999.

Nightly entertainment in summer includes a jazz ensemble and a roving magician, but Sam believes his food keeps customers lining up at the host stand.

“Everything we do is homemade from scratch,” Sam said. “We specialize in steamed, baked and broiled seafood. It's an upper class buffet. We serve stuffed lobster tail, crab legs and homemade dessert.”

Desserts include the Greek specialty, baklava, prepared by a Greek pastry chef. Lou D'Amato, certified executive chef at Seafare's Surfside Beach location, is a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America and a former instructor at the New York Institute of Technology Culinary Arts Center.

“We're bringing a lot of new ideas to Seafare right now,” D'Amato said. “We're grilling, poaching, smoking and broiling, versus the frying.”

Each night, D'Amato can play with three or four pans of special creations for the 70-foot seafood buffet, built to resemble a ship's hull.

D'Amato said the restaurant uses shellfish from Georgetown, Murrells Inlet, McClellanville and sometimes North Carolina.

“Murrells Inlet has some of the finest oysters I've found outside of Long Island,” D'Amato said.

Sam would like to take that fresh seafood concept around the country.

“Always, my dream was to open my own franchise,” Sam said. In his office above the Murrells Inlet restaurant are models of different-sized Seafare restaurants, concepts he will soon offer to potential franchisees.

Sam also recently hired Anthony Succo as his chief executive officer and Neal Skobina as his director of operations. The two businessmen have backgrounds in medical sales.

“They are very, very successful business people,” Sam said. “They may not know restaurants, but they know numbers.”

Succo said the Seafare Restaurant franchise concept is a great idea.

“I think they've got all the potential in the world to make a great go of it,” Succo said. “I think we're probably eight to 10 months away from being able to move forward with it, but certainly by the end of next season we'll be able to sit down and start interviewing potential franchisees.”

For Sam and Athina, success is sweet after years of hard work in a business they have always loved.

“I'm very happy,” Sam said. “I always tell my wife, ‘we worked hard, but God helped us to do it.’”

Sam also credits his wife with the restaurant's success.

“She's the backbone,” he said. “Without her, I couldn't do anything. She supported me all the time.”

As Seen in the Sun News, The (Myrtle Beach, SC) on March 9, 2003

MERMAID NIGHTS

MURRELLS INLET

Ashley Bennett can't wait to write ``mermaid'' on her resume.

The 18-year-old marine science major at Coastal Carolina University is getting hands-on experience - of sorts - while she swims nightly in a four-foot deep gurgling lagoon inside the Seafare Restaurant.

She jokes that her part-time job is preparation for ultimate career goals.

``You can't get much closer to the ocean than that,'' she said while perched on a treasure chest near the lagoon's edge.

Along with the abundance of shrimp and fish, the Seafare has begun regularly offering mermaids. Of course, these more mysterious aquatic creatures aren't fried. Sporting shell bras, shiny Spandex suits that run waist to toe and 20-pound urethane tails, the mermaids take turns splashing about in the water or resting on rocks.

College students by day, these young ladies put on fins and glitter at night to pass out beads as diners walk in the door.

The mythical sea creatures have been the Seafare's mascot for about two years since owner Sam Karos persuaded then-waitress Christina Player to dress as a mermaid to amuse customers waiting for tables.

Now the five mermaids on staff swim in an 18-by-20-foot heated pool in the dining room. Rocks, tropical plants, two fountains and a short wooden fence line the pool's perimeter.

Player, whose mermaid-outfitted photo adorns billboards throughout the Grand Strand, now manages the Seafare's mermaid program. Karos plans two mermaid lagoons, one inside and one outside, at the Surfside Beach Seafare, which is set to open after renovations are complete in a few weeks.

There, 15 to 20 mermaids will be on staff.

Recent mermaid hires completed a five-day training session that included learning to swim with feet bound together, which is a lot harder than it looks.

``I felt like I was going to drown because I wasn't used to the weight of the bottom fin piece,'' Bennett said.

Raecyne Garcia, 19, of Murrells Inlet easily took to the water. The Horry-Georgetown Technical College student said Disney's ``The Little Mermaid'' has always been her favorite movie, and she rushed to the Seafare when she saw an ad for the job opening.

“I've always wanted to be a mermaid since I was a little girl,” Garcia said. Her bedroom was once outfitted in Little Mermaid accessories, and she now has a mermaid toothbrush.

“When I first saw what we had to wear, I was so excited,” she said. “I thought, ‘Cool, it's my mermaid dream.’”

Garcia even persuaded friend Sheryl Carreon, 20, also an HGTC student, to join the school of Seafare mermaids.

But life under the sea isn't always like a story book. Mermaids have to be carried in and out of the lagoon. It's hard to walk in the tight costume with a heavy tail, and Karos doesn't want to ruin the myth for customers. Children cried after seeing mermaids walk around the restaurant during breaks, he said.

Player has first-hand experience in how seriously children take the mermaids. “In the summertime, you have 200 kids a night who want to talk to you,” she said. “It's like Santa Claus.”

Excerpt from *Southern Living Magazine*, June, 2006.....

Meet a Mermaid

.....Buffet restaurants along the highway loom as large as domed stadiums.

I opt for Seafare Restaurant in Surfside Beach [(843) 232-1366]. Inside, a sailing ship used as a serving table strains under an impressive lineup of more than 120 items, including crab cakes, snow crab legs, prime rib, and a myriad of desserts. Servers dressed as pirates entertain children. Mermaids wave a welcome. Now that's a road trip to remember.

Seafare Restaurant Facts

- **Opened: 1988**
- **Owners: Stephen and Nicole Karos**
- **Restaurant Concept: Pirate/Mermaid Themed Seafood Buffet**
- **Menu: 120 Buffet Items**
- **Featuring: Live Swimming Mermaids Nightly (weather permitting)**
- **Hours of Operation: Sept. – April 4pm – until; May – Aug.: 3:30 – until**
- **Contact Information: Stephen Karos, Owner
9925 Highway 17N, Myrtle Beach, SC 29572
843.232.1366; www.seafarerrestaurant.com**
- **Press Contact: Jackie Walters, Fox Marketing, Inc.; 843.235.6656/843.833.2662;
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