

CLOSE TO HOME

THE ART OF CELEBRATION

By DAVID CAMPICHE
FOR COAST WEEKEND

Joy has a habit of unfurling like ocean rain, perhaps a light mist or perhaps a deluge. Or strong yellow rays — sun motes, squeezing, as they do, through cumulus. Or first light tripping through thick cedar or spruce, daintily.

Grab the moments quickly, because happy times are often elusive. They dapple and drip and dance seductively, and fade as quickly as they arrive. They come in many forms, often arriving unannounced: a bird, a plane, a pure unadulterated blaze. And then suddenly, mysteriously, celebration is upon us.

A birthday

Recently, Fordinka Kanlic had a birthday and threw a party, a celebration for friends and family.

Fordinka is now ... well, no matter — but she packs gobs of energy into her small wiry frame. God winks in wonder. Is she an apparition? No, she is just a tour de force.

For nearly two decades, she and her husband, Ken Bendickson, have, nearly singlehandedly, run an intimate Bosnian-themed restaurant called Drina Daisy, on Commercial Street in Astoria. It is bright and cheery and draws attention through the big glass windows to a bright sign that proclaims a new adventure — unpretentious ethnic food — and to the orchids she grows and displays wondrously.

Drina is the river that flows under an ancient stone bridge through the heart of an antique city in eastern Europe. Daisy is Ken's mother's name. Fordinka comes by way of Sarajevo, and a divided country once known as Yugoslavia.

Hard times

It comes as no surprise that Fordinka was in the middle of a horrible conflict. This is not a happy subject. In the early 1990s, brutal attacks by Serbian militia devastated the region, arousing international condemnation.

That is precisely the reason that her birthday party was such a special and unimpeded gathering. The gal knows how to celebrate and deserves to. I insist



The party in full swing at Drina Daisy.

DAVID CAMPICHE PHOTOS

on mentioning this event because it struck me as unusual in the capacity to surprise and please.

Of course, Fordinka cooked for several days. She is very good at that: preparation, presentation and service (Ken serves). She works very hard but finds solace and joy in the production of her divine food.

This is her statement, hers alone. She simply insists on pleasing people. It reminds me of stumbling into Aunt Mable's Sunday farm dinner. You're lost on a back road in Kansas and knock on a strange door and are then invited in, and, lo and behold, you spend the next three hours eating, surrounded by abundance and cheer.

The gathering

Forty-some friends and a talented pick-up band (Jeffery Reynolds, violin;

Richard Thomasian, guitar; Shelly Loring, flute; Larry Aldred, drums; and Dan Golden, base) gathered. The food began to play out like a trout on a line. Small talk grew in intensity until it howled like a storm. People began to dance. And sing. More food arrived, staggering under the weight of heavy platters, but seemed to evaporate quickly. Sarma, lamb, bowls of ripe fruit. Cheeses. Goulash. Cabbage rolls. Fresh bread and Belgian beer. And, oh, much more! There is always more at Drina Daisy. How happy can you be?

Strangers seemed to corral into pods until the whole room was alive with talk, and yes, a natural and unassuming brand of joy. The band played on, marvelously, jazz and swing draping the room like a thick curtain. Wine and beer poured from opaque bottles of glass. I believe there was even a bit of fine whiskey. It



Fordinka Kanlic, right, and her friend Laurie Anderson.

was a moment when natural happiness overwhelmed the daily news, oppressive as that news seems in 2018.

Live for today

Fordinka circulated. Didn't everyone feel like her best friend? I did. I'm sure I was. Ken held things steady, as he always does. And there is no such thing as a short conversation with Ken. He seems to know so much.

The point of all this is simple. I have seldom had so much fun or seen so many people have so much fun. People happily engaged with each other: kids dancing with adults, with each other, alone, in pairs or mobs. The jazz ensemble, getting loose, letting loose. Different people at different tables singing along. And, so it seemed, everything in harmony.

We don't do this often enough. Maybe it takes a woman from a foreign country with strength and courage, who has fought through fear and oppression and stood on her own the way strong women do today. And letting joy rip just like that rain squall off the ocean.

I need more of this in my life, and I think we all do.

Thank you, Fordinka. Let the band play on. 