

Union Squared

LOVE STRUCK? MAIS OUI

Bride and groom followed different paths to the French Laundry, but their rendezvous at the restaurant led to love, then marriage

By Sarah Adler

Many gourmands rearrange their schedules to land a coveted reservation at the French Laundry. Jennifer “Jen” Fukui rerouted her life.

Ever since reading a 1997 New York Times review of the French Laundry in which Ruth Reichl called the restaurant “the most exciting place to eat in the United States,” Jen made a point of dining there every year.

Secretly, she longed to someday work for Thomas Keller, but her job as a broadcast news producer in New York for Peter Jennings and Barbara Walters meant her career track was set. But the terrorist attacks of 9/11 brought her to a turning point.

“I was standing in Barbara Walters’ office when the towers were coming down,” said Jen. “I realized that I wanted to live life fullest without guardrails.”

With no culinary credentials but hungry to learn, she convinced Keller of her determination and decided to move to the Napa Valley. Her mother was mystified. “You’re leaving ABC News to go work at a Laundromat?” she asked Jen. Her stepfather, immigration rights attorney Benjamin Gim, was similarly puzzled.

“My family thought that I had lost my mind, and my mother just about disowned me,” said Jen, who had attended private schools and graduated from Wheaton College. “It was incomprehensible for a young, educated woman with a successful career in journalism to pick up and work in a restaurant.”

During the next seven years, she worked every position on the restaurant floor before being named the director of special events for Keller’s California properties. She also met head sommelier Gregory “Greg” Castells, whose path to the French Laundry was as serendipitous as hers.

After graduating from restaurant, management and wine schools in France (including the Tain l’Hermitage, which accepts just 14 students into its sommelier program each year), the Provence native and son of a restaurant family went on to pour for a number of Michelin-starred restaurants in France. He also worked with a team of waiters for Prince Albert of Monaco, eventually becoming maitre d’ for special events.

One night at a bar in Monaco, Greg met the celebrity chef Gordon Ramsay. Not long afterward, not knowing a word of English, he moved to London to work for Ramsay and opened his namesake restaurant in Chelsea as well as his restaurant Petrus. He moved to the United States to work at Le Bec-Fin in Philadelphia, and was recruited to the French Laundry by a former colleague who had become the general manager.

For two years, Greg and Jen barely noticed each other. But in 2007, they teamed up while planning a diner’s 40th birthday. At a party at Jen’s house a few weeks later, they connect-



Photos by chrismanstudios.com

Jennifer Fukui and Greg Castells had their wedding on the grounds of the French Laundry, where they met when he was the restaurant’s head sommelier and she was director of special events for Thomas Keller’s California properties.

ed over international travel and their mutual passion for food and wine. Their feelings were immediate and complicated. She was in a long-term relationship; he was married.

“Jen and I share a thread of fearlessness and adaptability. We realized we had to deal with our lives in order to be together,” said Greg, who later divorced.

“It’s not your conventional love story.”

Bride Jennifer Fukui

“It’s not your conventional love story, that’s the reality of it. There was drama,” said Jen. “We are not embarrassed. Life happens. Our love is not a fleeting moment.”

For the next five years, they focused on making “each day memorable,” whether spontaneously driving down the coast for Jen’s favorite sushi in Los Angeles to building trust with Greg’s daughters, Kiara (now 8) and Elisabeth (now 5).

They supported each other through job transitions as well. Greg, now 36, left the French Laundry in 2008 to become the wine director for Soutirage, a Napa Valley firm that specializes in procuring rare wines and spirits. In 2010, Jen, now 40, became the manager of vendor relations at Gilt Taste, an arti-

sanal food website where Ruth Reichl is an editorial adviser.

When Jen finally met Reichl and told her how that one review changed the course of her life, Reichel replied, “Jen, stop! You are scaring me!”

It was only fitting that Jen and Greg marry at the French Laundry. The eight-course lunch for 60 family and friends was designed by chef de cuisine Tim Hollingsworth, who attended, as did Thomas Keller. Her stepfather, who died in 2010, was not there, but Jen was comforted that he had enjoyed a meal in the same dining room on his last visit.

The wedding feast included signature dishes (Oysters and Pearls) and customized recipes that included gifts like truffles from Gourmet Attitudes and Richart chocolates.

Before the reception, Jen and Greg paused in the vegetable garden to sip a special sake Greg had imported for the occasion.

“Our lives took turns that led us to the French Laundry,” Jen said. “Call it luck or fate—but to fuel our professional passions and find love? What this place has brought us is beyond what we could have ever imagined.”

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Castells (above left), Keller, Laura Cunningham and Fukui. Below left: French Laundry’s canapes of Santa Barbara sea urchin, Akita Komachi rice, avocado and pickled radish. Below right: French Laundry gift bag for guests, with added goodies from Gilt Taste vendors.



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