

THE STAGE IS SET AT
FIREFLY
{ FROM ROCK 'N' ROLLER TO FOODIE }

By Lisa Burwell • Photography by Romona Robbins

HE TRAIPSED AROUND THE COUNTRY ON COUNTLESS ROCK BAND tours promoting, managing, and sharing the stage with such acclaimed superstar rock bands as Mötley Crüe, Great White, and Kiss. It was the eighties and the hit “Welcome to the Jungle” by Guns N’ Roses was getting lots of radio play. The stage seemed to be set for the life of this San Diego native—at least until he met the love of his life, Stacy, at a NASCAR race. Stacy Burnham was living in Los Angeles at the time, having moved there from Panama City Beach to advance her acting career.

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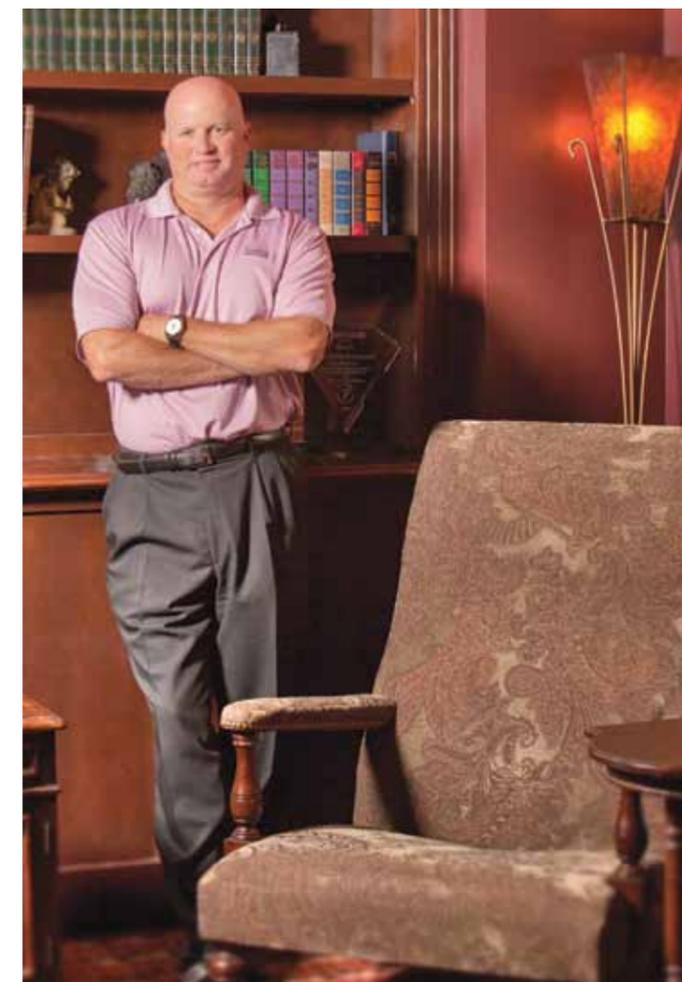
Fast-forward to present day and former rocker Dave Trepanier is lighting up a new stage. He is the owner of one of the best dining establishments to be found in Northwest Florida—Firefly Restaurant—which is changing the culinary scene in Panama City Beach. He is also a family man and evidently he relishes the role. He positively beams as he tells the story of how destiny brought him and Stacy together at the California 500 and how they married a few years later. Dave had always aspired to one day open a restaurant, so when the couple moved to Panama City Beach to be closer to his wife’s family (Stacy’s father, Wes Burnham, is one of the founding fathers of Panama City Beach and owner of The Resort Collection, The Shoppes at Edgewater, and Edgewater Realty), it seemed like the right time to embark on a new venture. Aptly named, Firefly has spread its wings and taken flight despite starting up in the midst of an extremely risky economic climate. Captivating and magical, the restaurant has been shining brightly since it opened five years ago. “We’ve survived an economic downturn and an oil spill, and we continue to grow—we are blessed,” admitted an obviously thankful Dave Trepanier.

Firefly continues to win awards and delight patrons. A well-trained staff, a talented and hardworking chef who has a fantastic command of his crew, and great food are a few of the keys to the success of this restaurant. Another is the comfortable ambience. At the center of the cozy, dimly lit dining room is a massive oak tree adorned with tiny accent lights that simulate luminous little fireflies, which absolutely beguile diners.

Always a trailblazer, Dave has garnered accolades and awards that include his most recent honor: making Urbanspoon’s list of “America’s Most Popular High-End Restaurants.” With only 250 restaurants chosen out of 600,000 from across the nation (and only twenty-five of those were Florida restaurants), Firefly joins other world-famous restaurants as one of America’s favorites. “We pride ourselves on being known for our creative culinary excellence and dedication to our Gulf roots,” said Trepanier. “Chef Paul Stellato and our staff are the reasons we’ve been able to achieve a reputation of excellence and maintain our high standards night after night.” The restaurant has also been awarded The Golden Spoon Award by *Florida Trend* magazine two years in a row, proving that the unique concept behind the restaurant and its menu has been a big success. The accolades extend to its wine list as well—with a cellar boasting more than two thousand bottles, Firefly earned *Wine Spectator’s* Award of Excellence for five consecutive years.

With exposure like this, it won’t be long before everyone will know about the culinary gem tucked in the middle of the Shoppes at Edgewater. (The unassuming nature of the location seems to make discovering this restaurant all the more delightful.) Just inside the doors, friendly hosts welcome guests to decompress

in a lively and dimly lit bar with paneled walls of select hardwood. A large library-style lounge casts a distinct Hemingway vibe: bookcases surround the room, a fireplace is centered at the back wall, and plush leather seats and couches are perfectly situated throughout the room. To understand the dining experience at Firefly, one needs to know that it’s just that—an experience. Whimsical, romantic, mysterious—the almost surreal experience of dining under the sprawling oak tree with its twinkling lights makes one feel as though Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* has come to life.

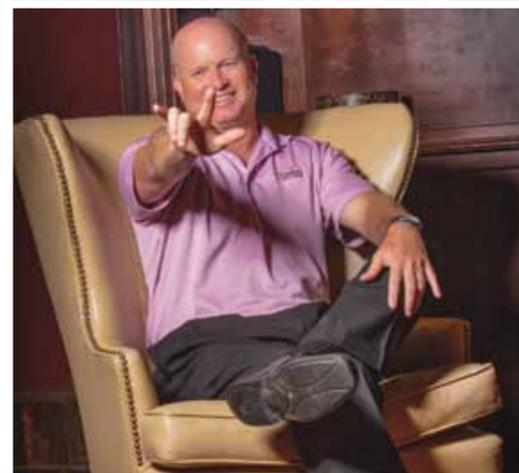




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Known for freshly caught fish, imported exotic seafood, locally sourced produce, succulent beef and fowl, artisan pizzas, handmade pasta, and excellent sushi, along with an extensive wine list, Firefly can best be described as a Mediterranean-style bistro. Executive Chef Paul Stellato has introduced Firefly's diners to what he has coined "French Floridian" cuisine, a combination of fresh Gulf seafood paired with exquisite sauces. Steaks and chops are prepared on an 1800-degree broiler, which sears the meat and enriches the flavor. Among Firefly's most-loved dishes is the wild Texas boar shank, which is slow braised in tomato sauce after being rubbed with espresso. "It falls off the bone, and then melts in your mouth," says Trepanier, who counts the shank as a personal favorite. "In my humble opinion, there are so many favorites at Firefly that it is hard to pinpoint just one, but the she-crab soup is one that you just have to try."

Not too many chefs and restaurant owners can lay claim to hosting the President and the First Family, but that is exactly what occurred in the summer of 2010. The Secret Service whisked President Obama and his family in through the back door, and they dined like royalty as Firefly's staff gave them a taste of the finest food and the most authentic Southern hospitality. And, if that wasn't prestigious enough, Chef Paul recently returned from London where he cooked for Team USA athletes at the 2012 Summer Olympics. He was one of a select few chefs chosen through the BP-sponsored "Spirit of the Gulf" program (www.teamusa.org), which aimed to bring Southern hospitality to Team USA and their families. Chef Paul, along with seven other chefs from Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana, prepared meals during an Olympic luncheon on August 9 and for a dinner during



the closing ceremonies. An acclaimed Firefly house recipe was on the menu for Team USA: sautéed Gulf grouper with fresh corn, grape tomatoes, and shallots, topped with a sherry cream and jumbo lump crab sauce.

Although many of his family members still live in Southern California, Dave Trepanier now calls Panama City Beach home with his wife, Stacy, daughter Ellie, and a new baby on the way. It's the all-American dream to be a winner—and it looks like Dave has captured the gold. ■

To reserve a table tonight, call 850-249-FFLY (3359), or visit the restaurant website at www.fireflypcb.com.

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