

# Theodore “Ted” J. Balestreri

1940

RESTAURATEUR, BUSINESSMAN, PHILANTHROPIST

WRITTEN BY MICHAEL CHATFIELD

Ted Balestreri’s life story is a quintessentially twentieth-century American, rags-to-riches tale writ large: a young man, relocated to an unfamiliar place, uses his wits and a deeply ingrained work ethic, business acumen, and years of experience to build a business empire that transformed the economy and culture of an entire region. Ted is probably best known to the public for the iconic Cannery Row restaurant he founded with longtime friend Bert Cutino in the late 1960s—aptly named The Sardine Factory—in a then-run-down industrial area on the Monterey shoreline, literally on the wrong side of the Southern Pacific Railroad tracks. But the restaurant was just the beginning for this energetic entrepreneur. With Bert and two other partners, Ted diversified his holdings, forming Foursome Development, a commercial and industrial building corporation where he serves as managing general partner. Today, Foursome Development is the controlling group of the Cannery Row Company, an entity that transformed a gritty former fish processing district into what it is now: the crown jewel of Monterey Bay’s travel and hospitality industry.

The timeworn stoops of brownstone buildings, molten summertime asphalt streets and cacophonous crowds of kids of 1957 Brooklyn couldn’t have been further removed from the sleepy unpaved pathways, quiet-as-a-church-mouse, fog-kissed Hansel and Gretel-style cottages of Carmel-by-the-Sea, California. That’s where the teenaged Ted found himself after driving cross-country with his mother and sister, Lorraine. “It seemed like another planet to me,” he says in the accented, raspy voice that still carries a strong hint of his East Coast origins. “My father had passed away. In his will, he left me the whole world to make a living in—so I wasn’t encumbered,” he says with a wry laugh. “But, more seriously, he also left me the

gift of living in the United States, the greatest country in the world. Limitless opportunity abounds here. I believe that being an American is one of the greatest gifts one can receive. That was my true inheritance.”

He was also bequeathed a wristwatch and a Pontiac in which the family followed the well-worn path to California. “We came here to visit my Uncle Frank, who was in the produce industry. What a culture shock! From Brooklyn to Carmel—I thought I was being imprisoned. The streets were dark at night. I’d go out and there were no kids, no stickball games in the streets.”

It wasn’t just his surroundings that were unfamiliar. The rich, multicultural cuisines to which Ted had been steeped in were a thing of the past. “When I first arrived on the Peninsula, I went to Conrad’s Creamery on Ocean Avenue, walked in and ordered a corned beef sandwich,” the dyed-in-the-wool New Yorker recalls. “It came on white bread with lettuce, tomato and mayo. I nearly cried. I said, ‘What the hell? This is a sin!’” Perhaps this was the moment that planted the seed that would transform the culinary culture of California’s Central Coast.

The Balestreri family has its roots in two regions of Italy, though both of Ted’s parents were born here in the United States. His mother Viola (née Crispo) traced her family roots to Ceccano, near Naples; father Vincent was born to parents who emigrated from the area near Corleone, Sicily. “My dad was a very smart, very good-looking guy. He was a member of the Christian Brothers (a worldwide religious order of the Catholic Church) and at one point considered that to be his life’s work. During World War II, he pivoted to teaching, and soon was tutoring the guys who would become my uncles—my mother’s brothers.” His mother’s father owned a highly successful produce business in Manhattan’s Washington Market. One thing led to another, and soon the young lad was dating (and eventually married) his students’ sister. As mentioned, the elder Balestreri passed away in 1959, a tragic event that led the family to permanently relocate to the Monterey Peninsula.



**Young Ted with his father Vincent and mother Viola.**

**Ted's father Vincent, his mother Viola, Ted and sister Lorraine.**



“My mother always believed in hard work,” Ted says. “She hated to see me sitting around, doing nothing. I always had to be doing something. She carried with her a motto that said, ‘Nobody ever died of hard work.’ She instilled that in me. I learned at an early age that the only way to succeed is to work hard, be persistent and never quit in the pursuit of your dreams.” And work hard he has, beginning as a paperboy delivering the New York World-Telegraph and The Sun. “I won awards for my work at that job, and it’s also where I learned to reward myself when I succeeded at something. I’d buy clothes. And let me tell you—that jacket looked better, those shoes looked sharper, and that shirt fit better when you earned it yourself through your own hard work.”

Of course, that work ethic followed him to Carmel, where he finished his senior year at Carmel High School. By this time, he was also building a reputation as a go-getter in the Peninsula’s hospitality industry. Learning the trade starting with positions as busboy and dishwasher at the Highlands Inn, Asilomar Conference Center and Casa Munras (a property his company now owns), he learned the ropes of the business

from the ground up at those and several other peninsula restaurants. Ted got his first break as maître d' at The Seven Pleasures, a high-end restaurant on Fremont Street in Monterey. (The building, once located at North Fremont Street and Airport Road, no longer exists.) “There I was, only 18 years old and running a nightclub while still a senior in high school. I wore a sharp mohair suit and greeted guests at the door. I loved it!”

Knowing that industriousness and education go hand in hand, Ted enrolled at Monterey Peninsula College after graduating from Carmel High. He pursued a short-lived athletic career, playing second base on Carmel High's 1958 championship baseball team. “At MPC, I made the football team and enjoyed it. There were a lot of all-Americans on the team, so my mother was incredibly pleased when I came home from a game and my uniform was always clean. I sat on the bench!”

As he did for many young men in the early 1960s, Uncle Sam called on Ted to serve his country in the US Army. He did basic training at the former Fort Ord and was chosen to attend the Leadership Academy at the Presidio of Monterey. “I learned lessons there that I still apply to my business life today, such as being flexible and not giving in to panic when you're under pressure. The Army was—and is—a good character builder for a young man. I made lifelong friendships that I maintain to this day.” Following his Presidio experience, he served the remainder of his Army hitch at Fort Lewis, Washington. After serving his country and armed with a degree from the Lewis Hotel Management School in Washington, D.C., he took a position as manager of the Marco Polo Hotel in Visalia, California—a decision that would shape the rest of his life. “I attended a dance and met Velma, the girl who would become my wife,” he recalls. Shortly after, he returned to the area that he had come to love, determined to make his mark—and he did just that. “When I got back to the Peninsula, I put my head down and went to work. My goal was to make \$1,000 a month as a restaurant manager. I thought if I could do that, I'd feel like I hit the jackpot.” Velma came to visit several times with a girlfriend, and eventually the

couple wed in May of 1971. “That was the beginning of the greatest inspiration I’ve had,” Ted says. “She understood that to succeed and provide for my family in the manner I had envisioned, I would need to work long hours...and she is not only understanding, she’s also beautiful! All these years later, I still think I’m the luckiest guy in the world.” The Balestreris have two sons, Ted II (Teddy) and Vincent (Vinnie). Vinnie and his wife Rachel have blessed the Balestreris with three grandchildren, Siena, Vincent II, and Nico.

Along the way, Ted worked alongside Bert Cutino, a Monterey Peninsula native whose family *was* engaged in the fishing industry. “Bert and I were in college together, and we were bussers, maître d’s, and managers at the same time. We became good friends. We were even roommates at one point.” By the late 1960s, Bert was working on Fisherman’s Wharf with legendary restaurateur Sal Cerrito. Ted was serving as General Manager of Art Boudin’s hugely successful Rogue Restaurant at Monterey’s Wharf II. “Bert loved the action of working in a restaurant as much as I did,” Ted recalls. It was only natural that these two young men—who shared experience beyond their years, a deep passion for the restaurant business and an old-world work ethic—would cast their fates together and create something entirely new that would change the face of California’s hospitality industry.

“My dentist was Dr. Caselli of Carmel. He believed in me and said that he would back me if I wanted to open my own place.” Ted started putting The Sardine Factory deal together, starting with leasing a ramshackle building with a two-year option to purchase—a structure that, among other iterations, had been home to a boxing gym, the area’s first YWCA, a ballet studio and a cafeteria for cannery workers. Located at Prescott Avenue and Wave Street, one block up from Ocean View Boulevard (now renamed and world famous as “Cannery Row”). “Bert quit his job with Cerrito. It was the three of us: me, Bert and Dr. Casselli. We opened the doors on October 2, 1968.”

It's difficult to envision now, but at first The Sardine Factory was very much a shoestring operation. Bert and Ted had \$968 to their names. "If we had a bad day, we were in trouble, but Dr. Caselli had faith in us." All the eatery's equipment was secondhand, and some creative solutions were necessary. "We didn't have enough money for a walk-in refrigerator box," Ted recalls, "so we bought an old milk truck with an inoperable engine, had it towed to the back of The Sardine Factory, hooked it up and used it for food storage. We did what we had to do. And you know what? I was never happier. I worked the front end and served as business manager; Bert ran the kitchen. And that's how it still is, all these years later."



**Bert Cutino, Dr. Caselli, and Ted Balestreri.**

Things started to happen. People came in, slowly at first, but the combination of excellent food, exemplary service, and the unequalled charm and innate hospitality of the restaurant's partners soon created a flood of loyal guests—one that has never ebbed. Before the two-year purchase option on the building was up, the two

entrepreneurs had not only bought the property, but had bought out their angel investor Dr. Caselli, leaving them the sole owners of The Sardine Factory in a partnership that endures to this day. "Dr. Caselli was a true gentleman. We have nothing but deep respect and admiration for him. He will always be a part of The Sardine Factory family—we call the restaurant 'the ship that launched a thousand ships.'"

The secret ingredient to The Sardine Factory’s success has been the high level of service, hospitality and star treatment afforded to every guest who steps through the door. “Our staff all have an eye for detail that makes everyone feel special,” Ted says. As head of the culinary team, Bert takes great pride in orchestrating the restaurant’s menus and keeping the food exciting. “He has always been dedicated to preparing the best, using the wonderful locally produced ingredients we have available to us here in Monterey,” Ted notes. “But it all comes down to one thing—and that’s love of your customer. I’ve always said, “If we made you feel at home, we’ve made a million-dollar mistake. Our job is to make you feel even better than you would at home—otherwise, why would you go out?”



**Bert Cutino and Ted Balestreri on the stairs of The Sardine Factory Restaurant.**

It wasn’t always easy. Early on, vandals broke into The Sardine Factory and did considerable damage to the contents of the building. “Someone didn’t want us to succeed. Those days were different...you couldn’t be too sensitive—it was the wild west down there then. You had to have a thick skin.” Obviously, Ted and Bert did.

The young partners had bigger ambitions, however. They couldn’t help but notice the many decaying cannery buildings that surrounded their restaurant. Seeing an opportunity, Bert and Ted partnered with Central Valley businessmen Harry Davidian and George Zarounian to found Foursome Development. The quartet’s first investment was another restaurant, the Butcher Shop on Ocean Avenue in Carmel.

The company proceeded to purchase Cannery Row real estate, starting with the building next door to The Sardine Factory that today houses The Whaling Station Steakhouse. That was the beginning of the neighborhood's transformation from post-industrial ruin to the gleaming tourism hub that it is today. It's a busy, bustling, family-friendly destination, bookended by two world-class, award-winning hotels. The name "Cannery Row" was made famous by author John Steinbeck, one of the Central Coast's most famous sons. Steinbeck's 1945 novel of the same name romanticized what was then a part of town that had seen better days. Older Peninsula residents may recall the saying, "Carmel-by-the-Sea, Pacific Grove by God, and Monterey by the smell," referring to the odiferous output of the canneries that cooked the tons of sardines brought in by the Italian fishing families. Today, that smell has been replaced by the scent of success and accomplishment. "When we started out, the lure of Steinbeck and the beautiful coastline location equaled a perfect storm for success," Ted says. Today, Cannery Row Company's holdings encompass an estimated 85 percent of the properties up and down Cannery Row and the adjoining neighborhood—including restaurants, hotels and commercial buildings.

"At this stage of my life," Ted says, "I like being able to achieve something and support others through philanthropy with an emphasis on inspiring our young people to lead successful, productive and fulfilling lives." Martin Luther King, Jr. once said, "Life's most persistent and urgent question is: 'What are you doing for others?'" Ted Balestreri has led a charmed life, bolstered by hard work and dedication. But he has also made sure to lend a helping hand to others perhaps not so fortunate. "God's been more than good to me. I give back as much as I can, and sometimes I feel as though I should give more." He supports a wide range of philanthropic interests, including Rancho Cielo ("They're doing God's work out there."); the Boys & Girls Clubs of Monterey County; Community Hospital of the Monterey Peninsula (Montage Health); California State University, Monterey Bay; the Naval Postgraduate School; Leon and Sylvia Panetta's Panetta Institute for Public Policy; and Robert Louis Stevenson School—among many others. The



annual golf tournament and wine auction Ted co-hosts with the National Restaurant Association has raised more than \$20 million to support its ProStart program (a two-year career and technical education initiative that focuses on teaching culinary arts and restaurant management skills). He is also a member of the Order of Malta-American Association. “There are currently only 1,800 members in the United States. We give to charities around the world, taking care of the needy—regardless of who they are. My heart lies where human suffering is. I firmly believe what my father taught me: there are two things you can give to a young child—or anyone, for that matter: the character to know what the right thing to do is, and the courage to do it. Everything else you can take away. If we can instill those two things in kids today, that’s where I want to put my money.”

It’s easy to believe that Cannery Row has always been like it is today: a lively and attractive bucket-list destination for families from all over the world. It took a lot of hard work—instilled by Ted’s mother—to make it that way. Ted, his partners and the many dedicated Cannery Row Company employees shared a forward-thinking vision. Together, they are entirely responsible for the transformation. “Success doesn’t just happen,” Ted explains. “A man who never had a chance never took a chance.” He stresses the necessity of staying true to one’s course and maintaining momentum. “Nobody coasts uphill,” he says. “You have to keep pushing. You have to achieve it.” And achieve it he has. One of the highest measures of success in



**Ted and Velma Balestreri on the cover of Money Magazine.**

any endeavor is the respect and admiration of one's peers, and Ted has been so honored on many occasions. The National Restaurant Association Educational Association Foundation presented its 2016 President's Award (for board colleagues who have gone above and beyond in their contributions), and the National Restaurant Association itself gave him the Inaugural Legends Award in 2017 for "his lifelong contributions and dedication to our industry." He was presented with the Silver and Gold Plate Awards from the International Foodservice Manufacturers Association in 1984; five years later, the Culinary Institute of America honored Ted with its Ambassador Award (a collection of top honors that remains an incredibly rare accomplishment). *Nation's Restaurant News* honored him with that publication's Pioneer of the Year Award in 2003, followed by the Fine Dining Hall of Fame Legend Award in 2006—the same year he was featured on the cover of *Money Magazine* with his wife Velma.



**A packing label from  
Crispo Brothers Produce  
Company in Salinas, CA.**

Ted Balestreri's family was not engaged in the Monterey fishing industry as were so many other Italians, but they did operate a successful produce business, raising row crops in Arizona, Texas and the Salinas Valley. "Thank God for all those fishermen and agriculture workers," Ted says. "They make it possible for us to offer the best products of the sea and the land to our guests." Yes, it's true that Ted forged an extraordinarily successful career outside the traditional path chosen by many Monterey Peninsula residents of Italian heritage. But it's also true that he greatly contributed to those families' livelihoods due to the copious amounts of seafood served at the world-famous Cannery Row restaurant he co-

founded. And he has also maintained a laser-focus on offering a helping hand to the people and organizations of the adopted hometown he loves so deeply. Today, his

sons Teddy and Vinnie are working in the firm, the former overseeing the hospitality end and the latter the development portion.



**The Balestreri Family: Vincent, Ted, Velma and Ted II.**

What's the most vital component in Ted's success? "That's easy. The magic ingredient is *love*," he says. "Love of God, love for your country, your family, your industry, your food, love for the service you provide, love for your guests, and most importantly, love for your employees." That attitude has translated into one of the Monterey Peninsula's most unique and enduring success stories. But he will be the first to admit that he definitely didn't achieve it alone. "I was the luckiest guy in the world to have three of the greatest partners one could ask for in Bert Cutino, the late Harry Davidian and George Zarounian and to be blessed with my wife Velma and our two sons. And we definitely wouldn't be where we are today without the talented employees we've had through the years."

Yes, Ted Balestreri is indeed a twentieth-century success story, but the enduring legacy he created is well positioned to carry his vision through the twenty-first century and beyond.

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