

Good Food, Good Racing, Good Guy

Owner Profile: Jeffrey Strauss

By Mary Forney

Racehorse owner Jeffrey Strauss is one of the good guys. Really. The chef/owner of Del Mar restaurant Pamplemousse Grille, Strauss was awarded the Nice Guy of the Year award in 2008. The San Diego organization presents the award each year to an individual who demonstrates commitment, generosity and caring for the community. Nice Guys president Archie Kuehn said, "Strauss's achievements as a businessman are matched only by his generosity and caring for others in our community." Strauss is well known and liked in San Diego County, not only for his philanthropic work but also for sharing his love for world-class cuisine with an ever-growing group of diners, race-goers and friends.



Photos of Jeffrey Strauss by Sean Popke

“I wake up in the morning, and I cannot wait to come to work; and at the end of the night, I don’t like to leave,” said Strauss, who is one of those lucky people doing what he truly loves. “Every day is like my birthday. I love being here,” he enthused.

Born in the Bronx and raised in northern New Jersey, Strauss went off to college in Massachusetts before heading for Europe to pursue his passion.

“I spent six months in the south of France, three months in Italy and a year in London working at some of the best restaurants in the world,” he said.

“I’ve basically worked in restaurants my whole life,” Strauss explained. “I started working in restaurants in high school at a little continental Italian restaurant, and I always loved the industry.”

them. They were just so far ahead of the game,” Strauss continued. “Their clients included presidents, kings, queens, ambassadors, prime ministers. It really opened my eyes to the world – and not just about food. They were also about politics, and they were about charity – and about supporting those things.”

Strauss certainly took to heart the example that his mentors provided in supporting charitable causes. As we chatted at Pamplemousse, his staff was busy preparing food for 700 guests for that evening’s fundraiser – the Drew Brees Celebrity Championship at Morgan Run Resort in Rancho Santa Fe, an event benefitting the Brees Dream Foundation in its mission to advance research in the fight against cancer and provide care, education and opportunities for children in need.

Along with his brother, Bill, Strauss is a major supporter of charities in the San Diego area, including cancer and cardiovascular foundations, Scripps Institute, the Navy Seals and several equine charities including After the Finish Line and CERF (California Equine Retirement Foundation).

“We lost our father a couple of years ago to cancer, so we try to support the cancer foundation as much as we can,” said Strauss. “I also support the Humane Society, but I focus most of my attention on children’s issues,” he added. “Casa de Ampara, Voices for Children and Walden Family Services are the ones I have really been trying to support the most right now.”

In racing circles, Strauss is well known for the annual fundraiser he hosts for the Don MacBeth Memorial Jockey Foundation, which will be held at Pamplemousse Grille again this year on August 19.

“We close down the restaurant, and it’s pretty cool – an amazing event. Tim Conway and his friends are our performers and all the jockeys are the waiters. I think this year we will go well over the \$100,000 mark,” said Strauss, who has been hosting the annual event since its inception. I think we’ve raised about \$800,000 since we started, he added. “I just want to be around when we hit a million dollars!”

Strauss moved to the west coast from Washington, D.C. in 1993, settling first in Los Angeles where a friend from Glorious Food, Tom Burn, had started his own catering company.

“The beautiful thing about Glorious Food is that it made me who I am today,” said Strauss. “But I didn’t really see potential ownership down the road. I felt I had more of a chance at ownership out here. My brother, Bill, and his wife Margie and their kids had just moved to Del Mar, so when Tom asked me to come to L.A., I moved out to California and went to work with him.

“I liked L.A. but loved San Diego, and I wanted to be close to my brother and his family.” So Strauss moved to Solana Beach and opened Pamplemousse Grille with help from his father and his brother, who is a partner in the restaurant.



The Pamplemousse and Alex Solis (center) turn for home, headed for victory in the 2009 Sham Stakes.

Strauss worked for some of the great chefs in New York City and did an apprenticeship at the renowned Greenbrier Hotel in White Sulphur Springs, WV.

“Then I met my professional father, Jean-Claude Nedelec, the chef and owner of Glorious Food, and moved to DC to run the operation there, even though the main operation was in New York. Basically,” Strauss continued, “between the Glorious Food catering and the restaurant stints I did, it all came together.”

Working at Glorious Food provided Strauss the opportunity to be creative and implement some of the new techniques he learned in France. Glorious Food, at that time an \$18 million a year catering operation, had a clientele list that was a real Washington “Who’s Who.”

“I cooked for five presidents,” Strauss recalled. “My first big event with Glorious Food was in 1984, the inaugural luncheon for President Reagan.

“We also did the Met Museum events; it was a great experience. Jean-Claude Nedelec and Sean Driscoll, the two owner/partners, were just the best. So much of what I have become is because of

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The real "face" of the restaurant, Strauss spends as much time mingling with his guests as he does in the kitchen. When he does one of his many catering events, he is right there cooking with his crew. But for the day-to-day activities at the restaurant he says that in many ways the pupils have become better than the professor.

"I have a great crew that's been with me forever. There's something – the chemistry – that just works. And I think that's one of our biggest attributes here," he explained. "The chemistry between the front of the house and the back of the house carries over to the guests." Many of those guests are winding down from a day at Del Mar, just across the street from Pamplemousse Grille.

Strauss's love of horses and horseracing began when he was a child in New Jersey, where his uncle owned trotters and pacers. His uncle, who owned a broodmare farm and raised horses, introduced him to horseracing at historic Brandywine Racetrack in Delaware.

"We came back from the races late one night when I was in high school, and I watched a mare give birth to a foal. The foal was on the ground, and the mare's nose was nudging the foal to stand up. He got up and he was kind of wobbly, and the mare just used her head to keep the foal balanced. That was my first experience ever seeing anything born. I was hooked with the love of horses when I watched the mare balancing her foal. That was one of the most amazing experiences."

Strauss bought his first horses two years ago in partnership with his brother, Bill, and friends Tom Lenner and Alex Solis Jr. "Tommy and Alex Jr. called my brother and me and said, 'We're going to buy four horses with a few other partners; are you interested?' So, we said, 'Great!' We got to name one of the horses, and that was The Pamplemousse."

That was the beginning of an amazing four-month roller coaster ride for Strauss and his partners. The Pamplemousse, a very distinctive looking roan colt with a big white blaze and a running style reminiscent of Seabiscuit, quickly became a Southern California fan favorite, winning the San Rafael and Sham stakes at Santa Anita and establishing himself as a major player on the 2009



Triple Crown trail. Then his promising career was abruptly cut short in April 2009 when he suffered a tendon injury to his left front leg and was scratched from the Santa Anita Derby the morning of the race. Not many new Thoroughbred owners experience such incredible highs and lows in such short order.

"The day of the Santa Anita Derby, I was in kind of a fog because of expectations," said Strauss. "But I can't say we were surprised. After his very first race, when he finished fourth, we were offered half a million dollars for the horse, and we said 'Sell him.' But he failed his vet exam. Then he won his first race, and we were offered almost a million dollars for him before the San Rafael. And he failed his vet. So he always had a little bit of a tendon issue... It's the nature of the beast. But thank god we didn't sell him! I would hate to have lost that horse

for \$800,000 or \$900,000. That ride alone was worth every penny of it. It's been fun," he added. "The best four months of my life."

Strauss and trainer Julio Canani never lost faith that The Pamplemousse would heal and return to the races; and this June, after many months of patient nurturing, Canani announced the colt had started jogging at Hollywood Park and would begin galloping in July.

Although Strauss admits he doesn't have much free time to go to the races, when he does it's mostly during the Del Mar meet. He also goes out for the morning workouts as often as possible and says, "There's something surreal about 6:00 to 8:00 in the morning down here."

Reflecting on his ownership experience, Strauss said, "I think it's good to have partners. This is a fun thing – it's social. I've never seen a winner's circle photo with just one person in it! What better thing to do with your friends and family? It's an awesome experience."

"And as far as the restaurant scene," said Strauss, "just as Glorious Food taught me, the reason we became successful is because I'm not just hiding myself in the kitchen. I love the fact that some of my clients are my friends and will be friends for the rest of my life. I'm in the public eye, I'm accessible. I don't have any part of my life I try to keep private. Because this is who I am, this is what I am," Strauss concluded. "I'm a chef. I'm a food person. I'm a restaurant guy. And I think that basically is what makes me."

That and the fact that he's a really nice guy.