

Sarducci's Is Special

Montpelier Mixologist Celebrates Food, Family and Fun

Some people progress through their career with visions of a porch and a rocking chair at the end.

Not Debra Lewis.

"My biggest fear is having to retire," says Lewis, the head bartender at Sarducci's Restaurant and Bar in Montpelier. "I love that restaurant and all the people in it."

Lewis began her career at Sarducci's 24 years ago, first bussing tables but quickly finding herself behind the bar. For nearly two-

and-a-half decades she's greeted customers, gotten to know them, mixed up their favorite cocktails, listened to their stories and provided some good-natured ribbing when required.

"When people walk through that door, they feel it," Lewis says. "They can feel the warmth. They sit at my bar and tell me that everyone there seems happy and that everyone is friendly to each other. And the truth is, with so many personalities here, there are very seldom any personality conflicts. That's because of the

people behind us. If someone has a problem, there are hugs and open arms. It's because of those two women."

The women Lewis refers to are Sarducci's founders Carol Paquette and Dorothy Korshak. The pair were working and managing restaurants in central Vermont in the mid-1990s when they decided to open a destination featuring fresh, locally sourced, authentic Italian food. Since 1994, it's been one of the best-known go-to spots for great Italian fare.

"They (Paquette and Korshak) would never ask an employee to do something they wouldn't do themselves," Lewis says. "That's what makes a great boss and a great restaurant. They're awesome. For example, they don't have an air conditioner in their office because the cooks in the kitchen can't have one. That's the kind of people they are."

It's an approach that's helped forge a meaningful bond and a sense of loyalty between the Barre resident, her coworkers and her customers. Lewis's personal cell phone will often start ringing at 11 a.m. with regulars looking to reserve a table that night. Lewis makes sure they're well taken care of.

"Those are the people that carry us through the winter," she says. "We make sure we always have room for those local people. Even during foliage season – we keep openings for them."

It's a sense of belonging Lewis doesn't expect to change anytime soon.

"Our head chef, Jeff Butterfield, is the heart and soul of the place now," she says. "In a few years he'll be the new owner, and he doesn't plan on making any new changes to the way we do things — which is awesome for anyone who works here."

What was your first night behind the bar like?

"It was exciting. I had already been a bartender at my mother's restaurant, and I had been waitressing a little while there. Once I started, I ended up having a full bar every Saturday with reservations because we raised hell and had such a good time. It was fun. I've always felt very comfortable here. Nothing is overwhelming about Sarducci's."

What do you like most about your job?

"The people. I've been here so long that when people come in they let me say whatever I want and do whatever I want. I've been here so long that I'm like the mother hen to the kids in the kitchen — and also the customers. I like the



Written by Bill Burke | Photography by Oliver Parini



The Forbidden Sour

- 1½ ounces Barr Hill Gin
- ½ ounce pomegranate liqueur
- ¼ ounce fresh lemon juice
- Soda water
- Lemon wedge

Pour the gin, pomegranate liqueur and lemon juice into a shaker. Shake well, pour into a snifter and top with soda water. Garnish with a lemon wedge and serve.

fact that I can be relaxed and kid with people. They'll start talking, and I tell them, 'When you come into this bar, don't talk about your problems, talk about mine. It's all about me.' Everyone will bust out laughing. And then they make me laugh. Montpelier has a lot of really cool people."

Share a behind-the-bar secret.

"Being able to mix drinks and talk to people at the same time is a real skill. When people get busy, sometimes they can't talk. People will tell me, 'Debbie you have eyes in the back of your head.' This weekend we did over 1,600 covers from Friday to Sunday. On a Friday night I can do 350. I'm making every drink, juice, milk, soda for the whole restaurant. That's a lot of drinks. While I'm doing that, my mouth is still running. That's a skill. Being able to communicate with customers while doing your job."

At the end of a shift, I...

"Sit down at the end of my shift at Sarducci's — it's always so busy that I have to come home and unwind for three hours. That's how busy it is. I can leave the restaurant at 11 p.m. and at 2 a.m. I'm wide awake and wired. So I try to relax. I watch TV — probably 'CSI' because it's the only thing on at that hour."

Always drink in moderation.

What advice would you give aspiring bartenders?

"Be yourself and have fun. And do a good job on your work. Do your work well. Work hard, have fun and most of all, be yourself!"

If you weren't a bartender, what would you be?

"I love my job so much that I can't imagine doing anything else. I guess I'd be a salesman selling something. I can sell. I've been told that before. If someone comes in, I'll look at a customer and say, 'How about some oysters?' Next thing he's saying, 'Yeah, that's a good idea.'"

What's a cocktail that Sarducci's does particularly well?

"Well, this is unique, but we do have one that the customers call 'The Debbie Margarita.' It's just a Cuervo margarita with Grand Marnier on top, but even the head chef asks for it by that name. But we do have a cocktail that's really great called the Forbidden Sour. It's Barr Hill Gin with pomegranate liqueur and fresh lemon juice." 🍹

Sarducci's Restaurant and Bar
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