

FIRST COURSE

Wanda Vision

The former longtime GM at Sierra Mar restaurant dishes up a new life, as a teacher and author.

By Mary Duan

When a wine industry luminary from Santa Barbara calls and says she's bringing Julia Child in for dinner, there's a certain amount of springing into action that takes place.

It's a state of being that former Sierra Mar general manager Wanda Straw describes as "hyper alert."

That call came in 2001, and Thekla Sanford, one of the founders of Sanford Winery & Vineyards, was on the line. Straw was working wine service a few nights a week, in addition to managing, and so the team put their heads together and quickly developed a strategy.

"I had a couple of other high-profile people there that night," Straw recalls. "Julia and Thekla came in and sat in a booth and Julia said, 'Wanda, I want you to pick out a nice wine for us.'"

Straw went with a Burgundy ("reasonably priced," she says) that had some age on it. She presented it at the table, opened it and Child didn't really respond. And then she did.

"Julia goes, 'Hmm, I don't know,'" Straw says. "I said, 'It's about 10 years old, let's give it a few minutes to open up.' And Julia responded, 'Wanda, I just don't think it's there, I don't think it's good.'"

Three more bottles were opened—"I kept pulling more expensive ones because I wanted to make her happy," Straw says, and just as quickly rejected. Then Straw pulled a big, juicy Pinot Noir, poured Child a taste and got the response she was hoping for: "She says, 'Ooh, it's delicious.'"

And those beautiful opened bottles went back to the wine room, to be shared later with the restaurant's



Wanda Straw has released her first book, *Sasha Noodle String Theory*, and her next book—a collection of short stories called *Julia Child Said My Name*—is in progress.

then-owners, Tony and Tricia Perault.

Child, meanwhile, came back the next morning, and had a cheeseburger for breakfast.

After 19 years at Sierra Mar, including 16 as general manager, Straw decided change was in order. The change: Leaving the restaurant industry, writing books, consulting and teaching. Straw spoke to the *Weekly* about that change.

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Weekly: How did you end up in Monterey County?

Straw: I was working for a company that did media for defense contracting, and I came here because we were trying to get the contract for the Defense Language Institute. I had never wanted to live in California, but they picked me up in a convertible and drove me down Highway 1 and by the time we were passing Santa Cruz, I said, 'I have to get this contract.' Then they wanted me to move to Maryland. My brother had been killed in a car accident and I was working myself to death not dealing with it. I took a leap of faith and left. That was in 1989.

What happened after?

Someone suggested I work in a restaurant like I did in college, and I went to Flaherty's as a server and manager. Then the Peraults called. I walked into the restaurant to the window at

Table 15 and you could see 70 miles down the coast and I thought, "I could do this for a year." Then 19 years passed.

What are some of your biggest memories from Sierra Mar?

Shawn Parker's wedding in 2013—that was wow. Two weeks before, we get a call that he wants to have this cinematic experience—he's a *Game of Thrones* person, and he wants a viewing and truffle pizza, all these different things. That night was incredible. It was the Red Wedding episode, and they watched it outdoors after their wedding.

Why did you finally leave?

In 2014 I had a birthday and I did the math on my life. I couldn't get vacations anymore because we were so busy. I was completely burned out. It was never, "Today was an easy day."

How did you end up working at Rancho Cielo?

A neighbor suggested I volunteer there and they hired me part-time to run the front-of-the-house program. I was like, what am I doing here? I don't know how to talk to teenagers. But I said, I'm just gonna be myself and if they get my sense of humor, they get it.

One thing is teaching them to have intent. I showed them how to buff silverware and I said, we have to pretend we're getting paid by the piece and not by the hour. They like being pushed. They love learning. I've come to really love it. Most of it is just showing up. ✦

MORSELS

BACK IN ACTION...Covid-era restrictions on businesses lifted in California on June 15. That means all seats are a go for restaurants and bars. Raise a glass, and don't forget to tip generously.

ROLLING ON...Emerging from the rugged coast, **Big Sur Taco** has been getting noticed with their handmade tortillas—unusual for a lot of places, and especially for a taco truck. Try the shrimp tacos, or one of their vegan and gluten-free options. They post up at El Estero Park in Monterey, the Carmel Valley Farmers Market and of course, in and around Big Sur. Catch up with them at [instagram.com/bigsurtao](https://www.instagram.com/bigsurtao).

SLOW SMOKE...It's back—the delish brisket grilled cheese sandwich is back on the menu at **Alvarado Street Brewery and Bistro**. Their cheese-slathered brisket sando, smoked for 14 hours, includes pickled jalapeño, onion jam and a house BBQ sauce with nitro stout. It's so rich, you may need to take a nap halfway through. Pick one up at Carmel Plaza, Carmel. 293-8621, asb.beer.

NIGHT AND LIFE...Emerging from the pandemic may require a few stiff drinks, and **Barmel** is back open to help. The "where young people in Carmel go" bar is now open until 2am. San Carlos and Seventh, Carmel. 626-2095.

BEAN BOYS...Coffee and beer cafe **The Bearded Bean** just celebrated the two-year anniversary of their bricks-and-mortar location in Oldtown Salinas, and another location in Carmel is now in the works. They are always good for a morning caffeine fix or an afternoon beer and a chill place to sit any time of day. 210 S. Main St., Salinas. 202-0966, thebeardedbean.com.

LA MUSICA...Seaside mainstay **Gusto's** now has live music nights, called **Musica dal Vivo**, every Thursday. Try one of their amazing pasta dishes or a pizza and pick up a drink during their extended happy hour, 5:30-8pm. 1901 Fremont Blvd., Seaside. 899-5825.

LOCAL BUCKS...A good lunch deal on some of the best vegetarian food in the county awaits you at **Julia's Vegetarian Restaurant**. During the locals lunch special, from 10am-2pm Mon-Fri, you can pick from a coconut or pumpkin curry for only \$15. They also have a late-night happy hour that means free vegan tamales with every drink after 8pm. 1180 Forest Ave., Suite F, Pacific Grove. 656-9533, juliaveg.com.

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