

# *Napa Valley* **Register**

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**Angèle Restaurant — a Father-Daughter Story**

## **Bettina Rouas is Part of State's Culinary Legacy**

Bettina Rouas knows what it takes to make and sustain one of the most highly regarded restaurants in the Napa Valley. Owner of the Angèle's eatery on Napa's waterfront, she's spent her life in and around restaurants. Her father, Claude Rouas, was one of the world's leading restaurateurs, and he was instrumental in bringing fine dining to Northern California in the 1960s.

"As a kid, instead of coming home after school, I'd go to my father's restaurant, L'Etoile, to do my homework," Bettina told me over coffee. "It was just normal."

Besides L'Etoile, she also occasionally stopped by another one of San Francisco's most fashionable eateries, Fleur de Lys, which was owned by her uncle, Claude's brother.

As we sat talking about her extensive history in the restaurant business and her deep appreciation of her father's influence, around us the Angèle staff quietly readied the restaurant for the dinner service. Although focused on our conversation, Bettina's eyes occasionally scanned the restaurant, providing nods of encouragement or a few simple words of direction. Spending time with Bettina at her restaurant was like spending time with the captain of a ship — a ship that she's built with her own hands under the influence of her family, and especially her father.

"I am proud of what Bettina has built at Angèle," Claude said during a later meeting at his own Auberge du Soleil restaurant and resort in the hills above Rutherford. "She was ready to open this restaurant 13 years ago — I knew it at the time."

Having grown up surrounded by the busy hum of San Francisco restaurants, Bettina moved to Napa Valley in the early 1980s, about the same time her father opened Auberge.

“I moved to the valley and started high school at St. Helena High,” she said. “During that time, I worked at Auberge.”

At that time, she might not have realized she'd embarked on what would become her life's passion, but it soon became apparent.

“After high school, I moved back to the city to work the front of the house staff at Prego and Ciao and then became manager at Undice,” she said. “I enjoyed the work and San Francisco and it was exciting, but I wanted to spend time with one of my aunts who lived in Paris. She'd raised my father and his brothers, and she was getting older. I'd also had a connection with her and I wanted to spend time with her and learn the family's history, so I moved to France.”

Bettina stayed in Paris for four years, during which time she worked at restaurants and lived in a tiny, one-room apartment above Chez Angèle, a rustic neighborhood bistro. Angèle was also her middle name and the name of her grandmother.

“In France, I worked split shifts, and once a week I'd meet with my aunt and bring her lunch,” Bettina said. “She'd tell me about the family and my father's history, his growing up penniless as one of six children in Algiers, the capital of Algeria, going to hotel school when he was 14 and then moving to Paris after his parents died to be raised by my aunt. From that experience I gained a closeness with my family and our history, but also a deeper appreciation for the French culture and my father.”

While in Paris, Bettina also had the idea of one day owning her own restaurant. She moved back to the Napa Valley to continue her career, but this time with an increased focus, taking on management roles at the French Laundry, Bistro Don Giovanni and Bistro Jeanty until 13 years ago, when her father came to her with an observation.

“We were sitting talking one afternoon and he said, ‘I think you’re ready to own your own place,’” Bettina said, her voice softening. “I felt it, too. I was ready.

“When she told me the name for the restaurant I thought it would be too difficult for people to pronounce,” Claude said. “But she was adamant that it be called Angèle.”

Bettina had never known her grandmother, Angèle, but she had always felt a strong connection to her and the name.

“Everywhere I’d go there seemed to be some reference to that name,” she said. “A few years back, my dad took my sister and me to Algiers, and we went to the cemetery where my grandmother was buried. When we arrived, half of the cemetery had been mowed down by a freeway because it was a Jewish cemetery, and the rest was in tatters. My dad, in tears, said, ‘There’s no way we’ll find her’ because most of the tombstones were just stacked up, and I said no, let’s just go in and see. Somehow, through this maze of towering stacks and rubble, we landed at her gravesite. It had to be called Angèle.”

“I’ve known Bettina since we were teenagers, and she’s always been such a wonderful friend and a perfect host,” said Lael Newman-Keane, co-owner of the Healdsburg Bar and Grill and the wife of chef Douglas Keane.

“We actually went to Bettina’s restaurant on our first date,” said Keane. “Bettina knows restaurants and how to make people feel at home. It’s obvious the first time you meet her, and it’s one of the reasons I think she’s so successful.”

“And her father, Claude, has a presence about him, too,” added Newman-Keane. “I don’t know what it is, but he has this energy that makes people want to be around him and Bettina has the same thing. It’s a real gift, and it’s so much fun to sit back and just watch the two of them interacting with people. It’s a pretty special relationship they have.”

Although the ambiance and a deep family history might be enough to bring people into Angèle, it is the near-perfect execution of service and food that brings them back. Bettina is quick to say that her executive chef, Rogelio Garcia, is the driving force behind the food, yet it is clear that her expectations and experience play a big role in the kitchen, too.

Garcia has spent years honing his skills at some of Northern California's finest restaurants, including an initial stint at Angèle; The French Laundry; working under Keane at Cyrus; apprenticing at Hurley's in Yountville; and as the executive sous chef at the Calistoga Ranch. But when Bettina called him to offer the executive chef position in 2013, he was quick to respond.

"I just feel at home here," Garcia said. "We've built a menu that speaks of this place and uses the freshest ingredients. We are always tweaking things to make them better, but that's just the nature of the game."

To celebrate Father's Day, Bettina and Chef Garcia have developed a special menu.

"We are going to be opening at 10:30 on Father's Day with some great specials," Bettina said. "I always try and make this day special for the dads. We'll have a brunch menu, including eggs Benedict, French pastries, duck confit hash and more. We'll do some fun stuff, too. Dads often seem to get forgotten about, meaning Mother's Day is always incredibly busy, and Father's Day is not, but it should be."

The restaurant team encourages diners to make early reservations for the Father's Day celebration by calling 707-252-8115. Angèle is located on Napa's Riverfront at 540 Main St.

***Local Tastes*** by Tim Carl