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Alexander's Restaurant owners Alexander and Monika Bernard pose for a portrait at their restaurant in Naples on Monday, April 19. JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS

A dancer, a chef and the 26-year-old Alexander's Restaurant

Chelle Koster Walton Special to Naples Daily News | USA TODAY NETWORK – FLORIDA

He was an American chef, she a German dancer. When the clock struck midnight on New Year's Eve to usher in 1987, Alexander Bernard and Monika Boecker shared their first dance. He was spellbound by her nimble moves. She was equally impressed by his agility in the kitchen — and by the two-dozen red roses that awaited her at Margaux's French restaurant in North Naples, where Bernard was chef and part owner at the time.

"Alex has always been very, very generous," Monika said. "And he was in love already."

Alexander doesn't dispute this.

"I saw this woman dancing on the dance floor with these beautiful legs," he said of his bout of love-at-first-sight.

Looking back, he's glad Monika later returned to Naples from Germany with her mother. He had been mailing love letters to the wrong address. It took several years of long-distance dating, but the couple married in 1993. Two years later, they opened their acclaimed restaurant, Alexander's.

But let's go back.

Monika wasn't the first time Alexander fell head over heels for something. He fell in love with food as a 15-year-old cook at a pizza joint in his hometown of Old Orchard Beach, Maine. He deepened that relationship by attending culinary school at Johnson & Wales University in Providence, Rhode Island. He cemented it by working as a chef in high-end resorts: Ocean

Reef Club in Key Largo, Kiawah Island Golf Resort in South Carolina, and the Radisson Plaza in Minneapolis, which he helped open.

Alexander said opening a restaurant of his own had always been a dream. Monika had similar fantasies.

"As a child, I wanted to have a restaurant," Monika said. "I went out to eat with my parents, and I loved restaurants."

When the two married, these dreams also aligned, thanks to some familial pressure.

"I had a new wife, we had just had a baby boy, and we had just bought a house in Park Shore," Alexander said. "There was a lot of stress. Often

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Alexander's

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stress can make you aggressive.”

In 1995, the couple bought a small coffee shop near their new home. The price was right and Alexander liked the cafe's picture windows. They decided to keep it simple: They named the place Alexander's and created a menu of the chef's European-American favorites.

Monika paused her dancing career to help. She found the long hours and hard work taxing, but she felt prepared for them.

“Show business is about ten times harder than the restaurant business,” she said.

Today, she does a different dance.

Monika still teaches, as she did in Germany at her ballet school. And, between leading fitness classes and personal-training sessions, she also choreographs the social aspects of Alexander's, which is going into its 26th year.

When the pandemic struck and Alexander's was forced to transition to take-out, Monika coordinated it. She pivoted their concept from a fine-dining restaurant to a to-go place, while Alexander continued to serve the hand-crafted cuisine that's kept customers coming back all this time. She also expanded the outdoor seating.

While the restaurant is named Alexander's, Alexander admits his wife's touches are everywhere.

“About 10 to 15 years ago, she started with a healthy menu,” he said of the restaurant's ever-changing side menu, which may feature kombucha or coconut-carrot soup infused with turmeric. “She's into fitness. She's the healthier of the two of us.”

Travel, too, has influenced the evolution of his cuisine. Each summer, the Bernards close their restaurant June through September and head for Carmel, California. During that period, pre-COVID, they would also visit Monika's mother in Germany and travel around Europe.

Last summer, they road-tripped around the U.S. instead and brought home inspirations such as Moroccan lamb tagine from a French restaurant in



Guest enjoy their dinners at Alexander's Restaurant in Naples on Monday, April 19. PHOTOS BY JON AUSTRIA/NAPLES DAILY NEWS



Wine glasses are set for customers at Alexander's Restaurant in Naples on Monday, April 19.

Carmel, and a burrata, tomato and pistachio salad from Santa Fe, New Mexico.

“I look for stuff like that to keep me excited,” Alexander said.

The secret to their success is bringing loyal customers back again and again, and attracting new guests, as they've been able to during the pandemic by quickly expanding their outdoor seating.

The Bernards know this dance well, and yet it never fails to excite them.

As Alexander wrote in his Alexander's Restaurant cookbook a dozen years ago, he has a “need to keep things a little lively and surprising for my customers' sake as well as my own.”

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