

SOUTH BEACH BULLETIN

Dave and Mitsue Wolfenberger mark D&M Live Crab silver anniversary by giving back.

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D&M Live Crab's plant is located at 1720 N. Nyhus Ave. in Westport Washington's Marina District

Bay City residents Dave and Mitsue Wolfenberger recently marked the 25th anniversary of their highly successful Westport business, D&M Live Crab. The plant and its offloading dock are located near the Public Boat Launch at the foot of N. Nyhus Ave. in Westport's Marina District.

The couple celebrated the momentous occasion by hosting a dinner for more than 150 invited guests at the Ocosta Recreation Hall last Thursday, Dec. 5. An elegant steak and lobster dinner was prepared and served by Mitsue (nicknamed Mitsy by Dave), along with several of her friends.

Following the meal, the Wolfenbergers spent the evening not only reviewing their family and business growth over the past quarter century with a slide show, but also thanking those who have helped them along the way in various ways, including verbal acknowledgements, gift and appreciation plaque presentations and by giving door prizes.

In the beginning

David and Mitsue Wolfenberger were introduced and married by Rev. Sun Myung Moon, along with 2,000 other couples, in Madison Square Garden in 1982. They lived in Washington, D.C. for a while before moving to San Francisco, where Dave landed his first job in the seafood industry working for Golden Gate Seafood.

In late 1987, Dave accepted a job a friend offered at Giant Clam in Seattle where he butchered, racked and sold product at a fish smokehouse.

On Jan. 1, 1988, Dave and Mitsue loaded up their belongings and headed the Pacific Northwest with Kevin, the first of their seven children. Kevin is now 26. Since last year, he has worked as plant manager for D&M.

Dave worked in the smokehouse five months and then transferred to the live crab division of the company, where he sold product to small wholesalers and restaurants throughout the country.

With the close of Giant Clam at the end of that summer, Dave transferred to the company's frozen products division. The Wolfenbergers bought their first home in October, but by the next month, unhappy with his current position, Dave decided that he wanted to strike out on his own.

The following is the history of the Wolfenbergers' 25-year D&M Live Crab adventure in Dave's own words, as related to his guests last Thursday evening:

Life-changing decision

I met Mitsy for lunch at the Wendy's in Fishermen's Terminal 25 years ago. I told her that I gave my two weeks' notice at the fish plant where I worked. She wasn't surprised when I told her I'd quit.

Still, we had two small kids by then, we had just bought a house, and I didn't know what we were going to do next. I said to Mitsy as we were eating off the dollar menu at Wendy's, "What about the live crab business? I always liked working with live crab."



Start-up challenges

Mitsue was totally supportive and for the next two weeks after work, I drove out to Westport and Tokeland to scout out a place to set up shop.

By the end of those two weeks I had found the place we still are today. On Dec 5, 1988, we moved into the building.

I say we moved in, but actually there wasn't anything to move in. I remember so clearly walking into our empty building. The power hadn't been turned on. It was dark. The water pipes were frozen and busted. I looked around and thought of all the possibilities.

I talked my dad into loaning me \$13,000. I made a goal of getting set up by Christmas. There was only one problem. I didn't know anything about live crab systems or pumps or refrigeration, or even how to set up a business. My job at Giant Clam was in sales and that's all I knew.

I started out by visiting many of my old customers and picked their brains. I bought tanks, a chiller, a pile of lumber and by Christmas my crab system was up and running. That year the crabs were late and by the time they were ready, so were we.

'Fishing' for crab suppliers

I'd go down to the docks every evening when the crabbers got in and talk with them, trying to get them to sell me their crab. In the beginning, no one wanted to sell to us. The buyers had a stronghold on their boats and even though many wanted to sell to cash buyers for more money, they were afraid — afraid they might upset their current buyers — afraid that our checks might bounce — afraid we would be just another outfit that was here today and gone tomorrow.

They all were only too glad we were there and offering to pay more, which they hoped would get the boat price to go up, but none of them thought we would make it till the end of the season.

Fighting for an underdog

I have '10 Rules of Living' taped alongside my computer screen. Rule #7 states, "People favor the underdogs, but follow only the top dogs. Fight for a few underdogs anyway."

This described perfectly my situation. Fortunately for me, a few of those fishermen were willing to fight for an underdog.

One by one, they came to us, and either I would go down to their boats with a hand truck and garbage cans or they brought their crab up to the shop. These were in the days of the 'Crab God,' Leif Anderson (long-time managing partner of Washington Crab Producers).

Leif had a strong hold on his boats. It was hard to do anything in this town without Leif knowing about it. Sometimes when the fishermen brought their crab, they would pull all the way inside the shop and close the doors while we weighed them, so that Leif wouldn't find out.

It came slowly in the beginning, and that was probably good, because one of the perks people had in selling to us was that I was a cash buyer. However, I had already used up most of my cash in starting the business. That meant that I would have to sell the crab and then immediately collect the money in order to buy more.

Fortunately, my customers were eager to get crab and very cooperative.

Pickups to semi-trucks

Initially, all the crab we sold were boxed and shipped by air. We started out with an old pickup with a canopy. Then, when that was too small, I bought a horse trailer. The horse trailer caught a lot of attention and when people who were around back then think of those early days, they remember the horse trailer.

Over time, we began trucking. My first experience trucking live crab to California was in the pickup towing the horse trailer. It was Dec. 22, 1991. The season was still closed here and had just opened in Oregon.

Mitsy and I piled the four kids we had by then in the back of the pickup, drove down to Florence, Oregon, bought 5,600 lbs. of crab off the first boat to come in and drove it straight down to Los Angeles. We delivered at 8 a.m. Christmas Eve morning with the first crab of the season.

I remember driving back to Washington with the whole family listening to Christmas carols on the radio. The kids were singing along. We had a big Christmas dinner at a truck stop. There were no presents, but everyone was happy.

After that we got a step van. Next we bought a box truck.

During this time, we were either bringing crab up the ramps in garbage cans or buying across the docks. We bought from Al Lundgren at Bay Fish, Mickey Rounds in Tokeland and Clark Leighendecker in La Push.

D&M dock

I could see I was spending a lot of money paying for offloads, which motivated me to either buy a dock or build one. Finally in 1993, we built the D&M dock (adjacent to the Public Boat Launch).

That was the year that Washington Crab was bought out by Frank Dulcich and ten of his most loyal boats decided that it was time they too, would fight for an underdog.

Finally we had our core fleet. One of those fishermen, Louis Summers, is still here today. And one fisherman family — Jeff and Del Dungey — has been with us pretty much from the very beginning, even before we built our dock. Other fishermen included Tom Kelley, Vern Heikkila, Billy Burns, Charlie Eickhoff and Frank Fitterer.

Shortly after building our dock, we bought our first semi-truck. We needed it now that we were servicing our own fleet.

Handling with care key

In 1988 when we first came to Westport, there were only a few people buying crab for the live market and in a very limited way. Nobody knew how to handle live crab, either. When I would buy crab from another dock, they would dump them into our dry totes and all you could hear was the snap, crackle, pop of the crab ripping each other to shreds.

It took quite a bit of convincing even to get the crews to lower the dump bucket into the tote before they dumped the crab, instead of seeing from how high they could dump it and still hit the tote. From the

beginning, we were committed to *kunren* —creating the discipline, culture, and structures for continuous improvement.

When we first started selling live crab, all our customers cared about was whether they were alive or not. As more people got into the business, we constantly studied ways to improve our quality so that our crab would stand out from the competition. This has become even more critical since the emergence of the export market in China.

In our early years, we would bring the barrels of crab into the shop and dump them into our tanks. Then we would pack these out either into boxes for air or totes for trucking. It was common to have a garbage can or two full of crab legs and claws after a pack.

Soon we decreased handling by building a tote system. A short time later, we set up 1,000- to 5,000-gallon chill tanks so that we could chill the crab even before offloading them. That not only decreased mortality, but also decreased the number of damaged crab with missing legs and pincers.

As careful as we are in handling crab after we get them, premium quality crab would not be possible without the care and vigilance exhibited by our crabbers; both skippers and deckhands. They are first-handlers. They know that if they damage the crab, there's nothing we can do to fix them.

Just to give you an example of the pride our fishermen take in their crab quality, last year some of my nephews were down unloading the Allison Marie. They'd been working hard and it was about a month into the season. They were tired and slacking. Keith called me and was mad as hell that my nephews were mishandling the crab by scooting them into the middle of the tank with their feet, trying to ball them up.

This is the kind of pride that D&M boats, both skippers and crew, have for their crab. And yes, I did set the nephews straight.

I don't hire workers or commit to crabbers lightly. I know that if they work for us or deliver their crab to us, those employees, those skippers, and all their deckhands are all counting on us to keep them working and to unload their crab promptly so they can get back out there and catch some more while they are still there.

By the numbers

In 25 years, I've hired hundreds of people, unloaded hundreds of boats and made thousands of friends. D&M trucks have driven almost 3 million miles. We have bought lots of crab. There have been 25 opening days and 25 summer soft shell seasons, along with hundreds of price changes.

Behind every successful man...

I've spent an infinite number of nights lying in bed worrying about broken-down equipment, crab on the road, broken-down trucks, broken-down trucks with crab on the road, how to get everyone unloaded as soon as they come in, and problems with fishermen, workers and money.

In all that time, there's been one woman who was there by my side and every night when my mind was filled with all these problems and worries, she would lay her head on my shoulder and none of the other stuff seemed to matter so much.

Mitsy and I were quite frugal, and in the beginning we put every penny we made back into the business. I'm fortunate, because Mitsue's favorite flower is the daffodil, so while everyone else has to spend \$10-\$20 on a bouquet of roses, I'd just spend a few bucks on a bunch of daffodils and she was happy as could be.

I've had a wife who has always been content with whatever I could give her and I'm so grateful for her. For us, this 25th Anniversary is a time of overwhelming gratitude.

This evening isn't about Mitsy. It's not about me. It's not even about D&M.

This evening is a marker — a milestone. It's an opportunity for us to look back on the past 25 years and reflect.

It is a chance to thank God for the blessings He has given us — for giving us our health, our family, a good business, and for giving us such a wonderful community in which to raise our family.

It's also an opportunity that Mitsue and I want to take to show our most heartfelt appreciation to all of you for believing in us — for choosing to fight for an underdog — for your trust — for your help, and most of all, for your friendship, — for welcoming us to your community and showing us kindness.