

Granddaughter of the River: Lisa Tarabochia Clement

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By Donna Quinn—

The Tarabochia fishing family is legendary in the lower Columbia River basin. Lisa is fourth generation fishing family on both sides. This is the foundation on which she has built her personality, her ethics, and her life. As a young girl, Lisa was always fascinated by family stories of the Tarabochia's rich fishing history. Today, Lisa honors family tradition with wild Columbia River Salmon as she nourishes people at Clemente's, the restaurant she and her husband Gordon opened four years ago in downtown Astoria

Salmon brought Lisa's great-grandfather to the Columbia River to become part of the original gillnet butterfly fleet in the late 1800s. Cannery owner Joe Megler needed fishermen, and since the Adriatic was renowned for its great gillnet fishermen, he telegraphed Yugoslavian friends, declaring "huge fish were jumping out of the river." The Tarabochia family was one of the first to settle in Brookfield, a small town on the Washington side of the Columbia about 20 miles upriver from Astoria. Ironically, the Tarabochia family was also among the last to inhabit Brookfield.



Lisa's ancestors were all gillnetters who lived on the Adriatic in Yugoslavia. "The Tarabochia's were one of the first and oldest families on the island of Sansago (now called Susak) in the Istrian peninsula near Italy. My great grandparents came from Komiza, Vis and from Sansago. My grandmother Winifred Marincovich and my grandfather Joe Tarabochia were both born in Brookfield."

Brookfield became known as a Slavic community and in its heyday was home to almost 500 people. The town was situated directly across from the Tarabochia and Marincovich's new Columbia River fishing grounds. The hard-working Slavs built boats and houses, and then they started fishing and having babies, creating a thriving and lively community.

Lisa's grandparents, Winnie and Joe, had seven children-Joe, John, Katherine, Frank, Mike, Judy, and Joan. All the men fished. Lisa's father had his own boat at the age of 12. The women cooked, cleaned, raised children, hung and pulled fishing net, and invented creative recipes to keep variety in their fish dishes. Although fish was the staple of the Tarabochia diet, they also hunted duck, deer and elk, and collected berries from the forest. Their main occupation and pre-occupation was fishing though. They would fish all day and fish all night. When they weren't fishing, they were hanging net and they were thinking about fishing and talking about fishing. They revered the Salmon. Spending their days in the Columbia River with these spectacular and hardy fish was their passion.

"In the old days my family was so grateful to the Salmon, because they knew that whatever came up in the net was creating their economic future. Our family depended upon the Salmon. My father had a tradition of always kissing the first Salmon of the season."

Old time Gillnetters crafted all their own nets from twine, floats, and lead lines. Lisa's family spent hours stringing corks and laying out the nets. "Not everyone has the feel for hanging net, but my family really knew how to do it-and they still do," says Lisa. "It was a real art."

Lisa's Dad, John, was the first to marry and leave Brookfield for Astoria after he met Valeria Byrd at the Liberty Theatre, where she worked. Bumblebee Seafoods soon started providing bunkhouses for fishermen, so many of the Slavs moved to Astoria to fish for Bumblebee and the other canneries. The Slavs lived in Uppertown (the hills in the east part of Astoria), the Scandinavians and Finns lived in Uniontown (near the Astoria-Megler Bridge in the west part of Astoria). On the east side of Astoria the Slavs worked for Bumblebee while on the west side, the Scandinavians and Finns worked for Union Fishermen's Cooperative Packing Company.



Lisa spent her childhood on Woody Island, located just across the river from Brookfield. She was always on the Columbia fishing with her Dad. While he was hanging net, she was playing house under their float home when the tide was out, sweeping it clean until the tide returned bringing river gifts for her to clean yet again when the tide left. “As fishermen, our lives were measured by the tides.”

Lisa’s Dad was movie-star handsome and he was always nearby; they enjoyed an extraordinary bond. “My father was a wonderful human being. He was also an amazing fisherman. He knew the Columbia River; every slough, every sandbar, he could navigate in any condition. Good fishermen always have a sense of the river, even in the fog. It’s a feeling. He taught me great respect for the river and for the fish. Fishing was hard work and the weather was always challenging. You really had to know what you were doing to be a successful gillnetter on the Columbia. Although my father never graduated from eighth grade, he was a Master Fisherman and he kept meticulous books and logs from every drift, which I still have today.”

Lisa grew up surrounded by the love and acceptance of her large extended family. Four uncles and many cousins lived on Woody Island. It was an idyllic life until her father tragically died of a heart attack when she was only 12. “Everything my Dad did was special. A family friend said that watching my father lay out a net was like poetry. I miss him every day, but I’m grateful that he had a beautiful life fishing on the Columbia, a life which doesn’t exist anymore.”

All of the Tarabochias attended Catholic Schools, so Lisa went to Star of the Sea in Astoria, and then graduated from Astoria High School. While her brothers fished, Lisa was encouraged to go to college. Arriving at the University of Oregon, she was surprised to find that she was so different from her peers. “Family was all I knew-I am deeply rooted in my family history. It’s a lifestyle-I never had friends growing up-my cousins were my friends. My family was blissful. I have not one negative memory from my childhood. Woody Island is still a touchstone for me. I realized in college that I had a rare and unique childhood. I was extremely protected and everyone knew who I was, so I had a powerful sense of myself and my place in the world.” After earning a Bachelor of Science in Biology, Lisa started graduate school in Seattle but in a short time she began to feel the need to explore other lands and cultures. She thought about medical school and then decided on an integrated medical program in Santa Fe, New Mexico. She went there for three years and got a Masters in Acupuncture & Chinese Medicine.

Lisa met her husband Gordon at the Whole Foods seafood counter in Santa Fe. She was commenting to a friend that the Columbia River fish being displayed for sale there could not possibly be fresh since they were so far inland. The cute guy behind the fish counter took issue with her comments, and a lively debate between Lisa Tarabochia and Gordon Clement ensued. The rest is history. Lisa, with Columbia River water in her veins and Salmon in her DNA, brought home to Astoria her biggest catch to date; and Gordon joined the highly esteemed fourth generation Tarabochia fishing clan.

For many years the Tarabochia men have spent their summers fishing in Alaska and before Gordon could marry into the family, it was understood that he would accompany her brother JohnnyRay to Bristol Bay for the ultimate test. Gordon was physically and mentally challenged on his initial trip, but he loved it and goes fishing with JohnnyRay whenever he can.

Although Lisa and Gordon's backgrounds seemed incredibly different-Gordon was from a Philadelphia family of Italian Chefs-neither realized until much later that their ancestors had actually lived virtually across the Adriatic Sea from one another. Those close ancestral ties still bond Gordon and Lisa in modern day Astoria.

Today, Tarabochia and Marincovich fishing boats provide wild fish for Clemente's, Lisa and Gordon's "fresh, regional, and sustainable" restaurant. Lisa and Gordon share the title of Chef there as well as parental responsibilities to Isabella, 5, and John, 3, at home. Lisa's mother, Val, has an active ongoing role in her grandchildren's lives, and she also bakes desserts for the restaurant. Val is happy with her life, although she misses the old days on the river. "The best thing about that fishing lifestyle was being in the water-in the boat. Sometimes the fishing was good and sometimes it was bad, but you were still in the water. The fishermen considered their boats extensions of themselves. Once a fisherman, always a fisherman, it's in your blood."

Although gillnetting still exists on the Columbia, it is extremely limited and many fishermen have other jobs to make ends meet. It's a different world on the '

Great River of the West' today. Lisa's brother JohnnyRay continues to fish, as do all the Marincovich cousins. "Fishing gives you a feeling of independence, and our family has been really good at fishing," says JohnnyRay. "My 80 year-old Uncle Joe still fishes and I go to Alaska every summer as we all used to do. Today it's hard for people to sustain themselves on fishing alone. We all like the harvest of the fish, but sometimes it's just the fishing that's the most important."

Lisa says it's difficult to explain what fishing means to her. Fishing is a "feeling in your body." "You lose yourself in the water, the sky, the boat, the fish, the weather. You are part of nature, part of the food chain; the rewards are immediate and tangible. Fishing can be a spiritual experience."

The Tarabochias are continuing to feed families, nearly a century after their arrival on these shores. Lisa Tarabochia Clement, who is fiercely proud of her family history and respectful of the magic she says "still exists in this river," will make sure her children know their family stories. "We talk to the children about what the fish went through to get to us, and who caught it and why that's important. We eat Salmon in one form or another almost every day." JohnnyRay says that Lisa "almost lives on Salmon, it's like she's connected to our Dad that way."

This fall Isabella will follow in her mother's footsteps and attend "Star of the Sea", carrying on another Tarabochia family tradition in Astoria, Oregon.