

Discovering Hudson Square



Downtown Express photo by John Bayle

Deb Barall's father, Sam Gold, once owned Deb's on Varick Street. However back then, it was called Sam's Sandwich shop.

Daddy knows best; family tradition continues

BY John Bayles

They exist in remote corners of the country and are sometimes rather common, just not here in New York City. "They" are mom and pop businesses that change hands, passed down to sons and daughters.

"We're dinosaurs, at least in New York," Larry Gold, owner of the Hudson Square nightclub SOB's, said recently.

Sam Gold passed away a year and a half ago. But he was able to see two of his own businesses successfully turned over to and transformed by his son, Larry, and his daughter, Deb Barall. For decades Hudson Square was home to Sam's Sandwich Shop and to Pot of Gold, both on Varick Street and both owned by Sam Gold. Today Gold's sandwich shop is "Deb's" and his coffee shop is SOB's.

Barall and the younger Gold both have fond memories of their father waking up at

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the crack of dawn at the family's New Jersey home to make the commute to Manhattan. As teenagers they began making the commute themselves, helping dad at both of his businesses. Barall, as an adolescent, adopted her father's love of food and Gold picked up his father's love of music.

Fast forward some 30 years and the elder Gold found himself looking for a new business model and struggling to make ends meet at both of his businesses. Barall was training at the Culinary Institute of America and Gold was out of college and traveling back and forth from Europe to Manhattan on a regular basis.

"I had been on and off for a bunch of years coming back to work in my father's sandwich shop to give him and his crew a break for summer vacation," said Gold. "After a few years of that, I decided I wanted to stay."

Gold had developed a love of Brazilian music while overseas and he convinced his father to close Pot of Gold and open up a nightclub; in 1982 SOB's was born. Gold began capitalizing on the popularity of Brazilian and African music that was at its peak in the late 70's. In the early 80's artists such as Fela Kuti began touring the states and Gold was able to book them at his club.

The elder Gold had decided to sell his sandwich shop and when Barall graduated with a Culinary Arts degree she immediately began working at the nightclub, running the kitchen among other duties. However a nightclub kitchen wasn't exactly what she had in mind.

"It was never all about the food [at the club]," said Barall.

A twist of fate allowed Gold to purchase the sandwich shop again, this time from a different owner. Barall recalled her father's suspicion about her wanting to change things up at the café.

"Dad came from this "greasy spoon" mentality," said Barall. "He thought I was crazy when I told him I wanted to serve really good food made from fresh ingredients."

But as with his son's idea, Sam Gold gave his daughter his blessing.

Today both the son's and the daughter's vision have proven incredibly successful. SOB's is no longer just a Brazilian/African music venue. Instead it has morphed into a renowned venue for all types of world music and urban music. While still attracting avant garde musicians, hip-hop heavy weights like Kanye West and Wyclef Jean have also graced the stage.

And Barall has turned Deb's into much more than a sandwich shop. She has a catering company as well that gives her the opportunity to use all sorts of flavors in a variety of ways.

She said she always had a passion for food, citing the family dinners she would cook as a 12-year old in New Jersey. She said those dinners, while they don't appear on her catering menu per se, without a doubt influence the dishes she serves and said her father's love of food is certainly evident in everything she cooks.

As for the son, Gold said his father wasn't really into world music and that in fact he preferred classical. But he did say his father supported him when he came up with the idea for SOB's and was certainly very proud of the success that followed, as well as of him.

Barall echoed her brother.

"We had an incredibly supportive father," she said. "And he helped us live out our dreams."