

Blues and Brews:

PHOTOS: BOBBY G'S PIZZERIA



Robert Gaustad

Compared to his 30-plus years of belting out tunes on a harmonica, Robert Gaustad is a relative newcomer to the pizza business. He's even played harmonica with Hendrix. "Not Jimi Hendrix," notes Gaustad, co-owner of Bobby G's Pizzeria (bobbyspizzeria.com) in Berkeley, California. "I think he was Jimi Hendrix's nephew or cousin or something. He was pretty good with a guitar."

Gaustad is indeed the Bobby G. in Bobby G's Pizzeria, and his path to the pizza business was a roundabout one. After a short career in the film business, he spent 20 years working in the high-tech software industry in the San Francisco Bay Area. But, having spent part of his youth growing up in New York, he never lost his craving for good pizza. "When I moved from New York to Los Angeles in 1982,

there was no good pizza, so I spent years and years making my own," Gaustad says. "Then I moved to the Bay Area, which was kind of back home for me, and I worked as a chef at a restaurant in Sonoma. So I had that experience to draw on as well."

Gaustad and his partner eventually found a great location for their pizzeria: a building that fit the vision they had for the restaurant. "We wanted to make a place that would be a neighborhood hangout," Gaustad recalls. "And I think we've done pretty well. We have great food, a good assortment of locally brewed beers, sports and live music. We've been successful, especially considering that we launched just when the economy went south."

Undoubtedly, part of Bobby G's success stems from Gaustad's first love: the live music hosted at the restaurant. A vibrant

blues music scene thrives in Berkeley, and Gaustad regularly books local bands to play on Saturday nights. Sometimes he even sits in with the band and plays harmonica—unless he knows he's out-classed. "Mark Hummel comes and plays here, but I'm not going to sit in with him," he laughs. "He's world-class, probably one of the top 10 harmonica players in the world. There's nothing I can add to what he can do with a harmonica, so I don't even try."

Recently, the restaurant continued its musical leanings with the launch of an open mic night on Tuesdays, which is growing in popularity, partially due to the no-cover policy at the restaurant. "We pay the bands, but there's no cover charge," Gaustad explains. "We just want people to come in and enjoy the music. It's a lot of hard work, but we've done pretty well. Of course, it gets stressful at times, but for the most part, it's a fun place to work."

Gaustad also admits that he has his own motives for making Bobby G's a great place to hang out. "I figured that if I had to spend 60 to 70 hours a week here, I wanted to be around things I enjoy," he says. —*Lee Eric Smith*



Clockwise from top: Bay Area bluesmen Mark Hummel and Rusty Zinn have a jam session at Bobby G's Pizzeria. Bobby G. plays harmonica alongside vocalist Miz D. The pizzeria hosts the Berkeley Jazz School Big Band.