



Photo/Alan Dep

Nick's Cove co-owner Pat Kuleto rests on a foggy afternoon on the pier near the restaurant on Tomales Bay in Marshall.

By Leslie Hartleb
Marin Independent Journal

ON A LATE October afternoon when the sun pours down like hot syrup along the San Francisco waterfront, restaurateur and designer Pat Kuleto, looking jazzy in an amber silk shirt and white hard hat, is beaming at a 150-year-old olive tree. It's huge, with a trunk 5 feet across and branches so thick and leafy they blot out the sky.

Earlier that day, the tree had been trucked down from Corning in Tehama County. Then it was placed in an immense water-filled hole so it could take root and thrive in its new location at Rincon Park at the foot of Folsom Street.

It will dominate the shared patio of Kuleto's latest restaurants, EPIC Roasthouse and Waterbar, set to open in January. They're the first privately owned buildings to break ground on the San Francisco waterfront in almost 100 years.

It's a major achievement to shift and replant such a titanic tree, but by Kuleto's standard of what makes a challenge, it was nothing.

"I'm tenacious," says the burly restaurateur, 62, who's known for his signature pepper-and-salt ponytail and beard and larger-than-life personality.

Detail MAN

Pat Kuleto says it's the little things that have made his restaurants so successful

Like a supercharged terrier, he'll push through complex, seemingly uncompleteable projects such as Nick's Cove and Cottages restaurant and hotel in Marshall, which took seven years and 50 permits to build, finally opening in July.

When they debut, EPIC Roasthouse and Waterbar, which Kuleto owns in conjunction with chef-partners Jan Birnbaum and Mark Franz of San Anselmo, will have taken scores of permits to legalize and five years to finish.

"I can't quit. When I get something in my craw, I will not quit. To me it's being a loser if I don't accomplish it," says Kuleto, who lives in Sausalito and Napa Valley.

What he's accomplished so far is a career that could belong to three people: He's designed and built 190 restaurants. He's sailed around the world and up the Amazon River on one of his many boats — he owns nine. For the past 15 years, he's planted vineyards and

developed his own 18,000-square foot winery, Kuleto Estates, on 800 acres in the hills above St. Helena. The self-described "compulsive builder" calls his hillside house adjacent to the winery "a big restaurant with a few rooms attached. I can seat 100 people for a meal in my house and there are no bad seats."

His company, Pat Kuleto Restaurants, owns seven: Boulevard, Farallon, Jardiniere and the two Rincon Park destinations in San Francisco; Martini House in St. Helena, and Nick's Cove. Boulevard, with chef/partner Nancy Oakes and Farallon, with Franz, each gross more than \$10 million a year. Jardiniere, with chef/partner Traci des Jardins, takes in more than \$5 million.

See KULETO, page D6

MARIN



PROFILES

NAME PAT KULETO

► AGE: 62

► HOMETOWN:

Sausalito, Napa Valley

► OCCUPATION:

Restaurateur and designer



In 1978, after his return from sailing around the world, Kuleto caught a 25-pound halibut.

Provided by Pat Kuleto

KULETO: Enjoys life and bringing pleasure to others' lives

From page D1

According to Tiburon resident Pete Sittnick, director of project development for Pat Kuleto Restaurants for the past six years, EPIC Roasthouse, which will specialize in all types of meats and birds, and Waterbar, which will serve fresh fish from local as well as international waters and with its own in-house 20-foot-high aquarium pillars, are each expected to gross more than \$10 million annually.

"There are only 10 or 12 restaurants in San Francisco doing more than \$10 million a year, says Sittnick. "With these two, we're going to increase the inventory by 20 percent."

A friend of Kuleto's for 20 years, Sittnick finds him "very creative. Pat enjoys life and he enjoys bringing pleasure to others' lives. I think you get that in his designs. His restaurants sort of psychologically transport customers away from all the pressures and hassles of daily life."

Kuleto grew up in Los Angeles. He laughs about how when he was a child, he wouldn't just build forts and dig tunnels like other kids. By the age of 10, his forts were seven stories tall with power and running water. "It wasn't elaborate. I took a barrel and ran water from it through a pipe.

"Building, traveling, sailing, fishing and water have always been my thing," he continues.

Irreverent when he talks about himself, Kuleto says he barely finished high school, getting kicked out "because I grew too big to fit the seats."

What set him on his designing path was a trip to Europe in his late teens. He went on the QE 1.

"It changed my life," he recalls. "The Queen Elizabeth got me into the ocean sailing thing, the aesthetic of boats, amazing service: one table, one waiter, they walk around pouring the wine, you're going, 'Oh my God do



Photos provided by Pat Kuleto

Pat Kuleto in his restaurant, Kuleto's, in 1986. Kuleto's two latest restaurants will open in January.

you believe that?' In Europe, I was surrounded by thousands of years of incredible aesthetics. Everything was so well-rubbed, so well-lived in. It gave me the inspiration for many of my designs. People love to be in places that look lived-in. It makes them feel safe."

Kuleto's restaurants range from the comfy, such as Kuleto's on Powell Street, to the edgy, such as Waterbar, but each is so theatrical that it has a patina of history or a sense of story behind it.

"Travel inspires me to create," he says. "I always come back with ideas. If I'm in South America or Australia or New Zealand, I come back with things that I incorporate into my designs."

Some of his adventures sound like what you'd expect of a young Indiana Jones. At 17, Kuleto completely restored a 1931 Model A Ford

and drove it 2,200 miles of dirt road from Los Angeles to Columbia.

"It was before the Pan American Highway was completed," he remembers. "I did it on a bet that I could get down there in back in 30 days. I made it in 17 1/2 days, but I never got the money."

Kuleto began his restaurant career at 19, working as a waiter in a resort at Lake Tahoe. He evolved into restaurant design by becoming a general contractor.

"I would tell a client, if I could build the restaurant for cost plus 10 percent, I would design it for them for free," he says. "I kind of went on from there."

Early projects included the chain of Refectory Steakhouses for which Kuleto was designer, general contractor and construction manager. The chain was bought by

Saga Foods in 1973. Kuleto received enough money from the deal to take off for an extended sailing trip around the world.

What put him on the national map was his innovative Fog City Diner, which opened on Battery Street in 1985.

It may have been his 110th restaurant, but it was the first one he designed and built as what he calls "full-package," where every element, from food concept to furniture, seating, even glassware, floor tiles and bathroom design, integrated to punch home an overall concept.

His passion for detail is why he thinks he's been so successful.

"I totally live through my eyes," he explains one afternoon at Nick's Cove over a glass of Kuleto Estate pinot grigio. "I can sense a project instinctively, move details



A preteen Pat Kuleto shows off fish he caught in Echo Park in Los Angeles.

around in my head and change them to where I can make the whole thing work. I have a photographic memory. When I say I feel it, I really feel it."

Kuleto says that on any project, if he couldn't find something he wanted he'd have it made by an artisan.

"I'd design and build everything with my own hands. I'd go to a glassblower and say, 'Let's turn this bowl into a light fixture.' Or I'd go to a stained glass artist and say, 'Let's create these incredible fixtures. I've put a lot of artists into business.'"

Kuleto's appreciation for art and artifacts stands out in the boathouse/bar at the far end of the 400-foot pier that spears Tomales Bay as an extension of Nick's Cove Restaurant. He's stuffed the little shack with antique harpoons, vintage corkscrews, blocks and tackles, fishing equipment, an old cannon, a giant turtle shell, battered oars, a huge marlin lure that Kuleto positioned above an intimate bar so it looks like a sculpture.

"Do I love collecting? I have thousands of collections," he grins as he shows off Nick's

details. "Everything you can imagine."

Married and divorced, Kuleto has an 11-year old son, Daniel.

"I want to travel with him, spend a lot more time with him," Kuleto muses. "Now that I'm almost finished with these two restaurants [EPIC and Waterbar], I'm actually going to try to modify my lifestyle. I want to work hard for three months, then go on a wild vacation to the upper reaches of the Amazon or Africa or a great fishing adventure or a civilized month in Eastern Europe or something like that. And I'll take Daniel with me as much as I can."

When asked if he has a motto, Kuleto laughs.

"It's all good," he says. "Truthfully, everything in life is exciting and invigorating for me: it's about staying enthusiastic, up and pumped. Life shouldn't be a job. So I try to keep it as fun as I can and stay positive, while I like to give pleasure and make people's lives happier through my restaurants. It's not that easy to get that balance."

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