
THE MERMAIDS OF THE WHARF

BY MARCIA GAGLIARDI · PHOTOGRAPHY BY CAROLE TOPALIAN

Angela “Angel” Cincotta is one tough cookie. She says of herself, “The bucket stops here.” Her Sicilian grandmother, Annetta Alioto Lazio, was definitely tough. Her two sisters, Annette Traverso and Mary Ann Shepherd, are also tough. It takes a certain level of toughness to run a fish company, and if you’re the only females running a fish company on Fisherman’s Wharf, you better have toughness in spades—especially if your business happens to sit on the beleaguered lot of J-10.

“The girls” of the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company, as they’re known around the wharf, come from a long line of fishermen. Their grandfather, Tom Lazio, started the family business in 1940 in Eureka, calling it the Tom Lazio Fish Company. In the 1940’s he opened the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company (originally named the F. Alioto Fish Company) along with one of their grandmother’s brothers, Frank Alioto, and another relative, Sal Tarantino. It’s the last of the five fishing businesses Tom Lazio started that remains today.

For years, the Lazio Fish Company was a thriving business, selling Dungeness crab and all kinds of fish, from salmon to halibut to Petrale sole, depending on the season. The granddaughters, Mary Ann, Annette, and Angela, began helping out when they were 18 or 19. They were originally relegated to the back office, since their grandfather wouldn’t allow them on the floor. But as soon as he would leave the building, Annette was known to ditch her dress and change into jeans and boots and start filleting some fish. (Annette not only filets fish like a champ, but she can schlep the hefty ones as well.) Sometimes a phone call would come in, alerting them that their grandfather was on his way back. Off with the jeans, and back on with the dress. Even though he acted like he didn’t know about it, Angela is quite sure their grandfather knew and just wasn’t letting on.

When their dynamic grandfather passed away at the ripe age of 92 in 1998, their grandmother, Annetta Alioto Lazio, who was previously found more often at home than on the dock, boldly took the helm. (She died in 2003 at the age of 98.) Her daughter, Stephanie, acted in an advisory role, while granddaughters Mary Ann, Annette, and Angela stepped up.

When “the girls” took over the fish company, the last thing they expected was to get their phones lines disconnected, sometimes once a week. Or when the phone was connected, they occasionally received death threats. But hardest of all was being boycotted by the local fishermen—the same fishermen who had been working with the fish company for 20-30 years were suddenly not delivering product to “the girls.” Angela says of the matter, “The fishermen wouldn’t talk to you. They acted like playground bullies. It was like a pact, and no one would give in.” Seems

they didn’t like having women in the male-dominated fishing industry, and they were being icy clear about it. (Remember, this wasn’t 1948—it was 1998.) Fortunately, word spread to some fishermen up north in Bodega Bay and Morro Bay that “the girls needed product.” Soon enough the outside boats came to the rescue and crossed the lines of the boycott.

Today, the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company is the last commercial fish-processing and fish-selling business on the wharf. It’s backbreaking work. While boats usually come in by the afternoon, some nights you can wait for a boat until 10 at night. Early hours, late hours, unloading boats, getting crabs into tanks, sorting crabs, cooking crabs, heaving and filleting fish, ice shoveling; it’s not the kind of work someone wants to do, let alone work that many women want to do—but if you’re part of this family’s business, it’s the kind of work you have to do. Their fish company is also the only fish company on the wharf that ships, so



the holiday season is utter madness. (You can send someone homesick for San Francisco their Package #2: a Dungeness crab, a loaf of sourdough bread, and a chocolate Golden Gate Bridge.) Without family members who pitch in, they wouldn't make it through.

But crab season intersecting with the holidays has been the least of the concerns that furrow their brows. Their biggest problem has to do with J-10, the lot their business sits on. Behind their storefront on Jefferson Street (known as Fish Alley) are a pier and an attached warehouse they used to share with their neighbors, the California Shellfish Company, for unloading boats and processing fish. (The Port Commission also shared a portion of J-10.) But in August 2000, the Port Commission presented the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company and the California Shellfish Company with a flabbergasting three-day notice to cease all fish processing activity and to vacate their portion of the wharf. It seems some workers in the Hyde Street Harbor noticed damage under the J-10 portion of the wharf. The port then dispatched an engineer to inspect and assess the property, who noted the pilings were rotting and stated it was in immediate danger of toppling at any moment. He red tagged it, forcing both companies to cease all fish-processing activity on the wharf in three days, and remove all equipment within seven days.

The port's order delivered chaos to the Alioto-Lazio business: they could no longer have their boats unload out back and were forced to move their ice machines and crab cookers off the pier (the port stored some of their additional equipment). While the issue of how to get their fish delivered and other processing needs were being sorted, they lost precious business; the days of being able to cook 500 crabs in half an hour evaporated like sea spray. After speaking with someone at the port, who asked to remain anonymous, even he agreed the notice was "ham-fisted" and "panicky." Weirdly enough, the condemned fishing shed is still standing today, six years later, even after a suspicious two-alarm fire in 2004.

The girls couldn't help but feel like they were being targeted again and that this was not only another attempt to run them out of town, but a move to separate them from their highly coveted property. They felt something was rotten in the state of Denmark. It bred paranoia about the port having designs on J-10 and made them think the port was secretly hatching plans to crush their humble family-run fishing business under a wrecking ball in order to create something more "tourist friendly," or at least more lucrative, like a hotel or a restaurant.

What followed in January 2001 was a suit against the port, with the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company alleging the port was negligent in their duty to act as a responsible landlord by

regularly inspecting their portion of the wharf and keeping them informed about its condition. The port contended it was a tenant's responsibility to keep the property well maintained and repaired under the terms of their lease. The case resulted in an unexpectedly generous victory for the girls, with a jury rewarding them close to \$3 million in damages. Their cousin, Angela Alioto, daughter of the former Mayor Joseph Alioto, was their attorney on the case. The port then appealed the case, but the girls prevailed—the original jury verdict was upheld.

The port had slated the decrepit shed and pier to be demolished in 2003, which was temporarily halted by a Superior Court judge and then unanimously blocked by the Board of Supervisors, pending an environmental review. The Environmental Impact Report was released at the end of 2005, and come springtime, the city comments should be published on the EIR. This is where it gets even messier: Exxon-Mobil used to store fuel in tanks that leaked and contaminated the landfill underneath J-10. While the oil company has taken steps to remediate and encapsulate the known contamination, it affects where, how, and when the fish company can rebuild their fish processing facility. The waiting game continues, chipping further and further into their lease that ends in 2036.

The girls are exhausted, the port is exhausted. Each side feels like they're right. Angela emphatically states, "I'm tired of speaking with attorneys instead of customers—I just want to be able to buy and sell fish." But fight she must, and like a Siren, she will be heard. She said her siblings all learned to survive from her parents, and "after a while, business becomes one of your children—you have to protect it. This business was important to my grandparents, and my parents, and it's important to us, the girls. It's the closeness of family that helps us weather the storm." If the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company left, then another part of the soul of the wharf is lost. As they boldly proclaim on their website, "The tides are against us in the male dominated industry—but they forget we grew up riding the waves!"

You can call the Alioto-Lazio Fish Company in the morning (415-673-5868) and see what kind of fish is available, or visit www.crabonline.com. For pick-ups, their storefront is at 440 Jefferson St., San Francisco.

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