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STAIRWAY TO HEAVEN

The Stars Align *for*
Bud & Alley's

★ Dave Rauschkolb Is in the
Right Place at the Right Time

By Colleen Sachs
Photography provided by Bud & Alley's



Dave Rauschkolb is a force of nature. He is, in no particular order, the proprietor of Bud & Alley's in Seaside, Florida, a husband, a father, a surfer, a golfer, an environmental activist, and a poker player. The interesting thing is how well each area of his life flows into the others.

I met with him at his newest venture, a second Bud & Alley's. It will be located next to the Lighthouse Marina and the venerable Capt. Anderson's restaurant. The Panama City Beach property is the former location of the Boatyard restaurant. The massive seventeen-thousand-square-foot building is on a working waterway, an interesting change from the beachfront Seaside location. Downstairs, an open kitchen and pizza oven bring diners right into the workings of the restaurant. Seating is available inside and on a large deck. There is also an outside bar and great water views. Because the building is on a working waterway, Dave plans to get a wholesale seafood license and add a seafood market to the mix.

The upstairs offers more dining and more expansive views. Dave points toward the pass and says, "Thirty years ago I used to paddle across that pass to surf." He goes by boat now and will dock that boat right behind the restaurant.

A new Bud & Alley's concept, the Marina Club, will also be upstairs. With deep blue walls and cozy seating, Dave is going for a relaxed yet sophisticated atmosphere for this area. He says it is "Garden & Gun meets marina." David DeGregorio of the Central Idea Agency, a longtime creative collaborator of Dave's, designed the logo for the Marina Club, which features an anchor—a recurring theme throughout the Panama City Beach location.

While the building was a construction site when I visited, the plan is to open the restaurant by this Memorial Day. The kitchen staff, led by Chef Lawrence Klang, is hard at work developing the menu. Nice touches include house-made pasta and bread. We tasted three samples of ice cream made by the sous/pastry chef, Brittany Adams: luscious peach with graham cracker crumbs, creamy salted caramel, and basil chocolate chip (a nice twist on traditional mint chip). Those tastes portend a menu filled with classic flavors and creative touches.

Until recently, Dave's business world revolved around Seaside. Opening a new restaurant in a second market thirty miles from that base is a big step. But, to add to the mix, Dave has also recently acquired an off-site catering business a few miles west of Seaside, in Grayton Beach. "I've always been fascinated by catering," he explains.

Wedding receptions, rehearsal dinners, and other special events have long been a part of Bud & Alley's in Seaside. In fact, Dave used to act as the wedding coordinator for the restaurant. He saw the potential to do so much more with an off-site facility. While that opportunity was taking shape, he received an

e-mail about the Panama City Beach property. "I had to act on both at the same time." Within just a few months, the Bud & Alley's brand has grown a great deal.

From the first steps of his career in the restaurant business, Dave's growth has been a result of his positive attitude and the personal relationships he forms and cherishes. He credits his management style—"leading by empowerment rather than fear"—to Al Parramore of the Oyster Shanty in Fort Walton Beach, where Dave had his first job shucking oysters at the age of nineteen.

Dave is an avid surfer. It is an avocation he began in earnest the summer before his senior year at Choctawhatchee High School in Fort Walton Beach, Florida. As with so much in his life, one area segued into another. Surfing was largely responsible for his beginnings as a restaurateur.

Dave's parents hoped he would follow in the footsteps of his father (a retired Air Force veteran of World War II, Korea, and Vietnam) and become a pilot. While attending Okaloosa-Walton Junior College (now Northwest Florida State College), he was working in local restaurants. While tending bar at the Back Porch in Destin, he kept a surfboard in the rafters and thought, "How cool would it be to own a restaurant on the beach?"

When there was a job opening at upscale Destin restaurant Les Saisons, he went for an interview with Tally Witcoski. It was just after that interview he experienced "one of the many amazingly lucky things that have happened" to him. As he was leaving the restaurant, he passed Tally's son, Scott Witcoski. Scott recognized Dave from surfing. Scott had seen Dave surf two years earlier and was impressed with his skills. Dave was hired and Scott took him under his wing and taught him the ins and outs of fine dining.

The pair often drove through South Walton County to Panama City Beach to take advantage of the particularly good waves at the pass near Grand Lagoon. At the time, the best route was along Highway 30-A. It was on one of those trips Scott mentioned that a developer in the area was looking for a restaurant to go into his new development. Scott wanted to stop to talk to the developer, and Dave protested that the surf was up. As Dave relates it, "Scott was driving, so we stopped." The developer was Robert Davis, the founder of Seaside.

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“I am who I am today because of my mom.”

“Scott asked me if a restaurant would work in this town in the middle of nowhere,” says Dave. There were only twelve houses there at the time. Dave, thinking they were just giving Robert Davis feedback, replied, “Maybe three months of the year.” But Scott meant for the two of them to create a restaurant in that spot. Dave, who had one semester of school left, found himself talking to his mother about leaving school to open a restaurant. “She thought it was a good idea,” he says.

Dave is incredibly open and speaks from the heart when discussing his mother, who passed away in 1998. “I am who I am today because of my mom,” he says. “She always believed in me.” Dave, who says he lacked intellectual self-confidence, also received encouragement from a college professor who told him he had a gift for leadership.

Suddenly, a pair of twenty-four-year-old surfers found themselves owning a restaurant in the burgeoning town of Seaside. Dave was thrilled to be “an active participant in a new community.” He says that Robert and Daryl



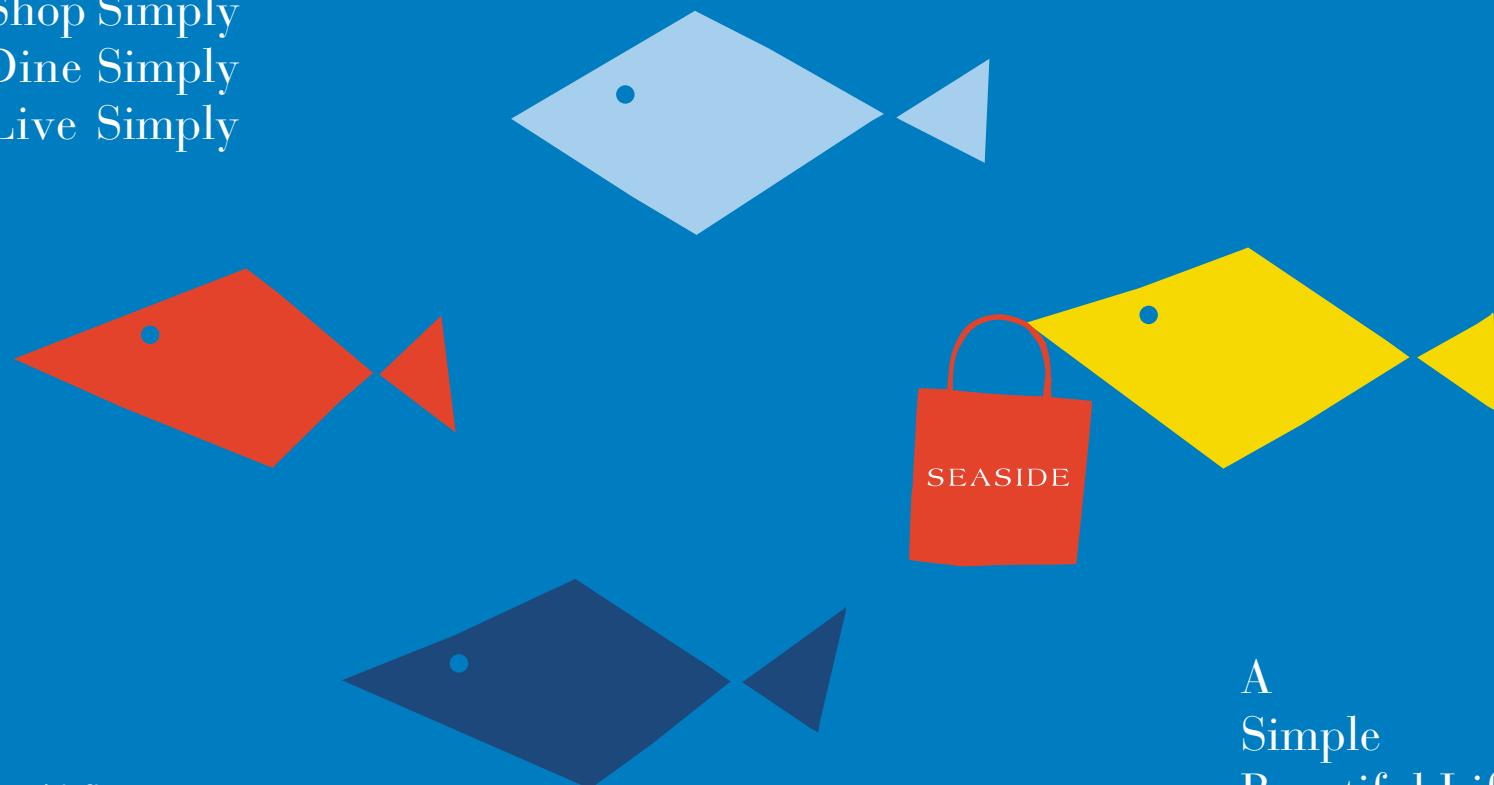
Dave’s open-minded attitude made it possible to grow the restaurant as the town grew.

One of the fortunate things about the location in Seaside was that a restaurant had already occupied the space. As Dave says, “It was a turnkey operation.” Scott was the primary chef, and Dave ran the front of the house. Dave took his mother’s advice to “associate with people you can learn from.” He had already learned a great deal about the restaurant business from Scott. In this new restaurant, he says, “I learned how to be a boss from Scott.”

Bud & Alley’s, named for Robert Davis’s dog and Scott Witcoski’s cat, opened January 20, 1986, and served dinner to twenty people. A loyal following developed right away and has stayed with the restaurant for almost three decades. “It is amazing to be able to hold a homeowner’s child in your arms and then years later teach that child how to bus tables,” says Dave. The business has grown from twelve employees in the early days to the current staff of 220. With the expansion, there will be 330 employees.

Learning from others has clearly been an important part of Dave’s growth in business. But, he attributes

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“It may not have had the best pizza of the trip, but the look of the place was just right.”

While the Panama City Beach market is very different from that of Seaside’s, the new Bud & Alley’s will seem quite familiar. Similarities include an open-air roof deck and a waterfront setting. Dave was even able to locate another train bell from the 1880s to echo the Seaside location’s tradition of ringing the bell to celebrate the sunset. Dave is happy to provide loyal fans with the casual atmosphere and cuisine they have come to know at Bud & Alley’s—“Great seafood, simply prepared.” He is also happy to be in the company of Capt. Anderson’s, which he says “set the gold standard.”

When Dave says, “I never worry about the competition,” it is said without ego. He believes strongly that there is no reason that everyone shouldn’t succeed. It is part of the positivity that is at his core, and that positivity seems to create more positivity. He praises the local business people, stating, “Everyone has been so welcoming.” Discussing the project, which was not even on the drawing board a few months ago, Dave says, “Every step of the way, through all the processes, all these doors opened. And they continue to open. It was meant to be.”

It is clear that Dave is excited about the business he is in. It is interesting that he credits some of his success to having attention deficit disorder (ADD). He says that while ADD was responsible for much of his not feeling accomplished in school, he finds that it gives him the gift of hyper-focus. “When I am interested in something—whether it is people or the restaurant business—I focus on it completely,” he says.

Dave is also devoted to his family. He adores his wife. He married for the first “and only time” when he was forty-seven. He says, “When I met her, I found just the right girl for me.” And he glows when he talks about being a father to his young daughter, Carlin. He says being a father “just changes everything.”

However, his passions don’t stop there. “I am passionate about this beautiful place we live in.” Dave has lived in the area since 1972. He has a clear connection to the water through his business and surfing. His love for the water prompted him to organize a protest of legislation that would allow offshore drilling within three to ten miles of our coastline. He recounted the beginnings of Hands Across the Sand in the article “An Impassioned Voice” (*VIE*, Summer 2010).

his success to others and to his own positive attitude. “I don’t see very many barriers, and I am not afraid of anything.” He continued, “I try to never get too upset when things don’t work out. If some of those other things had actually worked out, all this good stuff wouldn’t have.”

Fun is Dave’s guiding principle: he comments, “My pinky finger has had more fun than most people have ever had.” In fact, fun was built into the original business plan of Bud & Alley’s. Part of that plan included closing for one month each year to allow for surfing trips around the world.

After twenty years as an owner of Bud & Alley’s, Scott has moved on to other things. But Dave’s personal relationships continue to transform Bud & Alley’s. Friend and local architect Leo Casas (principal of Braulio Casas Architects) and Dave’s wife, Carol Murphy Rauschkolb, worked closely with Dave on both the Taco Bar and the Pizza Bar, as well as on the new restaurant that is about to open in Panama City Beach.

Dave was introduced to Leo when Leo was the town architect for Seaside. Carol is a talented interior designer. She designed the Tenth Anniversary Coastal Living Idea Cottage. She has also had designs featured on HGTV and published in *Coastal Living* and *Atlanta Homes & Lifestyles*.

With Leo doing the architectural design and Carol the interior design, the trio traveled to San Diego for research to make the food and decor of the Taco Bar authentic. On a trip to Italy to research the Pizza Bar, the same team spent time in many restaurants. On a side trip to the island of Ischia, they happened upon a pizza place that would become the inspiration for the Pizza Bar. Dave says, “It may not have had the best pizza of the trip, but the look of the place was just right.” Both concepts have been popular additions to Bud & Alley’s.

Dave credits a big part of Bud & Alley’s success to his management team led by Kirk Williams, whom he just promoted to general manager of operations for all restaurants, as well as executive chef David

Bishop of Bud & Alley’s Restaurant in Seaside. “Kirk does an outstanding job and is my right-hand man on all fronts. Kirk’s loyalty and dedication is unwavering. I can’t say enough about Chef Bishop’s steady leadership and creativity overseeing the food at Bud & Alley’s, the Pizza Bar, and the Taco Bar.”

It is one thing to create new dining concepts at an existing site. But opening a new restaurant next door to Capt. Anderson’s, one of Florida’s most successful seafood restaurants, might be daunting to many. Dave explains, “This is a very different market from Seaside. It is the entrance to Bay Point—where the boaters live.” He goes on to say, “These boaters have been to the original location in Seaside, so they will now be able to enjoy Bud & Alley’s without driving the distance.”



Two of the things which Dave Rauschkolb is proud of—Bud & Alley's and his Tesla Model S.

“I know not everyone can buy a Tesla. But there are little things everyone can do.”

What started as a local movement—to literally draw a line in the sand to stand against offshore drilling—grew rapidly. The February 13, 2010, event included eighty Florida beaches and around ten thousand participants. The sense of urgency in the event was a prescient warning. On April 21, 2010, the *Deepwater Horizon* spill occurred. The movement went worldwide with a thousand events on June 25, 2010. Dave says, “It was the biggest post-spill anti-oil protest ever.” He became a reluctant spokesperson on national news networks. It wasn’t that he didn’t believe in the cause. “It is the most important thing we can do as human beings—to end our dependence on dirty fuels and to protect the earth’s fragile environment for future generations,” he said. It was that he preferred hands-on coordination of the cause rather than promoting it on live television.

The movement he founded continues today. Hands Across the Sand is a 501(c)(4) corporation. Dave’s sister, Dede Shelton, is the operational director, and Dave provides the primary funding. He says, “The organization is still relevant, but is not as big as it was.”

The impact of the spill caused Dave to make changes in his life to reduce his dependence on oil. One of those changes was purchasing a Nissan Leaf all-electric vehicle and installing solar panels to charge it. The Nissan was followed by a Tesla Model S electric vehicle (See, “Super Fly and Super Charged,” *VIE*, January/February 2013). He points out that the Tesla, which can have a range of as much as three hundred miles on a single charge, is also great fun to drive. He loves driving his sedan so much that he has ordered a Tesla Model X electric SUV for his wife; it’s due to be delivered late this year. Dave speaks with enthusiasm and knowledge about how to become more energy conscious. He remarks, “I know not everyone can buy a Tesla. But there are little things everyone can do.”

Dave works hard and plays hard, and somehow he manages to balance the many facets of his life. There is time for business, time for family, and time for fun. Every week he makes sure to play golf and poker with friends, and he continues to surf. “I totally live in the moment,” he likes to say. “Because when you live in the moment, you are always on time.” And that time right now involves some very exciting things. ▀