

Eleanor Jean's Life along the Creek

by Ann Thomas

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One of the constants in Eleanor (Giannini) (McArdle) Jean's long life has been the creek. More than eight decades ago she played in the shallow water of Fairfax Creek and picked blackberries across from St. Rita's Church. For the next 40 years her family's restaurant above the creek was a center of Fairfax – and Marin – social life. Some time ago she moved downstream to the condominium where she lives today - overlooking Corte Madera Creek on South Eliseo Drive in Greenbrae.

In 1920 Eleanor Giannini and her brother Enrico moved from San Francisco with their parents to Fairfax, then a country town where city families came to spend the summer and tourists sometimes stopped on their train trip to the Russian River. Her parents, who came from Lucca, Italy in 1907, had purchased Buon Gusto in 1919. The restaurant and resort stood on eight acres off Sir Francis Drake Boulevard on the knoll west of town where the Fairfax library now stands. Fairfax Creek ran behind the restaurant and bisected the property. "The creek is where I spent my childhood," Eleanor said. "We went wading and would go down the creek jumping from rock to rock. Sir Francis Drake was not so busy then. Eleanor recalls that she would run down the driveway from Buon Gusto when she heard the chugging of the steam train so she could wave at travelers, and she jumped over the railroad track daily to St. Rita's to ring the bell at noon. "People thought it was a funeral I rang it so slowly," she said. She attended school at Dominican Convent at what is now Dominican University in San Rafael, graduating in 1930. Early in the century the K-12 convent school was a boarding school for girls, before it moved to Sleepy Hollow as San Domenico School.

Fairfax was a convenient destination for city families looking for a summer retreat. "Fairfax was country then," Eleanor said. "People would come and spend their summers at Buon Gusto." The cabins for overnight guests were eventually replaced with vineyards, fruit trees and a garden that supplied the restaurant with fresh vegetables. Four of the eight acres were sold to become residences on Muriel Court, but the restaurant remained a popular gathering place, serving Italian meals complete with antipasto, salad, soup, pasta, entrée and dessert. Along with vegetables from the family garden was bread from Bordenave's, meat from Del Monte Meats in San Francisco and poultry from San Anselmo's Marin Poultry.



Eleanor Gianini Jean on a bridge over Fairfax Creek sometime in the 1930s

A Buon Gusto specialty was the delicate yellow flower (with stamens removed) from young zucchini: dusted with flour, dipped in beaten egg with salt, pepper and a hint of lemon, then quickly fried in a skillet with hot olive oil. Besides the dining room there was a banquet room that hosted years of parties and wedding receptions of many old Marin families. The restaurant had a big basement where wine was made from the vineyard's zinfandel grapes, for family use. When the Buon Gusto closed, the crusher went to Sebastiani Winery, now Viansa Winery. As a young woman, along with helping at the restaurant, Eleanor commuted to work in San Francisco, taking the train to Sausalito and the ferry to the city. She was a secretary for Bal Tabarin supper club, which became Bimbo's night club in the 1950s.

Eleanor married Paul McArdle, in 1938 and they eventually took on management of the restaurant while living at 14 Scenic Road. Following Paul's death, Eleanor closed Buon Gusto in 1962 and married Alex Jean in 1965 when the County purchased the land for the regional library. When Buon Gusto closed it was the oldest restaurant in Marin County under one family's continuous ownership – 43 years. Two weather-worn stone pillars bearing the Buon Gusto name, which once marked the entrance to the restaurant's driveway, still stand on either side of Broadway between the library and Azalea Avenue.

Today Eleanor still lives next to the creek. From her deck she can look west to the Larkspur Boardwalk and east almost to the mouth of Corte Madera Creek; she once had a clear view of San Quentin but that was partially cut off when Drake's Landing was developed. She keeps up an active schedule, including membership in the Meadow Club (being one of its oldest members), keeping in touch with her daughter Paula and grandchildren in the East Bay and maintaining a container garden overlooking the same childhood creek.

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