

A man with a beard and balding head, wearing a white chef's coat, is focused on slicing a pizza on a wooden cutting board. He is in a kitchen setting with wooden cabinets and a built-in oven visible in the background. In the foreground, there is a white plate with a portion of the pizza and a blue glass. The text 'True Hospitality in the Hamptons Lessons on Listening, and the Art of Yes and No, with Gary Muller' is overlaid on the right side of the image.

True  
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Gary Muller



**A life in the Hamptons, running a picturesque inn perched at the end of Long Island, sharing fine food and drink with visitors from around the world. Sounds like a version of heaven to many.**

Without a doubt, Gary Muller – chef and co-owner with his wife Sylvia of the high-end bed and breakfast The Mill House Inn – certainly does enjoy his work. But for Muller, it's the joy of the business and the people he gets to interact with that truly make him happy. Hearing Muller talk about his work, it's unmistakable how much he loves taking care of people.

“The reason they’re coming back isn’t the room. It isn’t about the accommodations. It’s because there’s people there who care about them,” Muller says of his guests. That attitude is a necessity in this line of entrepreneurship.

That’s because, as anyone who has worked in hospitality, even as a server or a line cook will tell you, it can be an extremely difficult business, as challenging and chaotic as it is rewarding. It can be a life of wax and wane, feast and famine, fortune and misfortune.

While there are certainly aspects of running an inn in the Hamptons that are unique to that line of work, at the end of the day, the business lessons Muller has learned are universal. He’s navigated the rough waters of entrepreneurship using a mix of confidence in his craft, quick-but-prudent decision-making, and perhaps most of all, good listening. Muller has learned the most important lesson, and it applies to any business.

"I think it's all people. I don't think I ever sold food, and I know I certainly don't sell rooms right now. But I know the one thing that's for sure it's people. It's all about the people. **The only real asset you ever have is your team, your staff. You fail immediately without them and you succeed so well with them.**"





**H**is approach has paid off. The Mill House Inn and its smaller offshoot the Graybarn Cottage have been cited as among the best in the Hamptons. The Inn has been recognized by Travel + Leisure and the Travel Channel, highly rated by Zagats, named in the top 10 Hampton inns by New York Magazine, and on and on. Muller's breakfast has gained a reputation as one of the finest and most indulgent in town, with offerings like lobster frittata and egg nog brioche French toast. They've welcomed celebrities (he'll never tell), titans of industry, and folks who've traveled from across the globe to experience the lavish-but-cozy setting.

Of course, it's not always been Scotch and cigars for Muller. Although he'll tell you that he's got restaurant work in his blood, with his grandparents operating taverns in New Jersey post-Depression. "I've been in the hospitality business since I was just about old enough to hold up a knife and walk around in a kitchen. It's 50 years."

Prior to moving out to East Hampton to open the inn, he made much of his livelihood "feeding Wall Street" as a chef, restaurateur, and caterer serving primarily workers in the financial industry. Surprisingly similar to the tech startup world (although with much heavier brick and mortar costs) his career has been punctuated with risk and reward — jumping on opportunities as they arose, pouring his life into his work, and knowing when to move on.

**SUCCESS** STORY

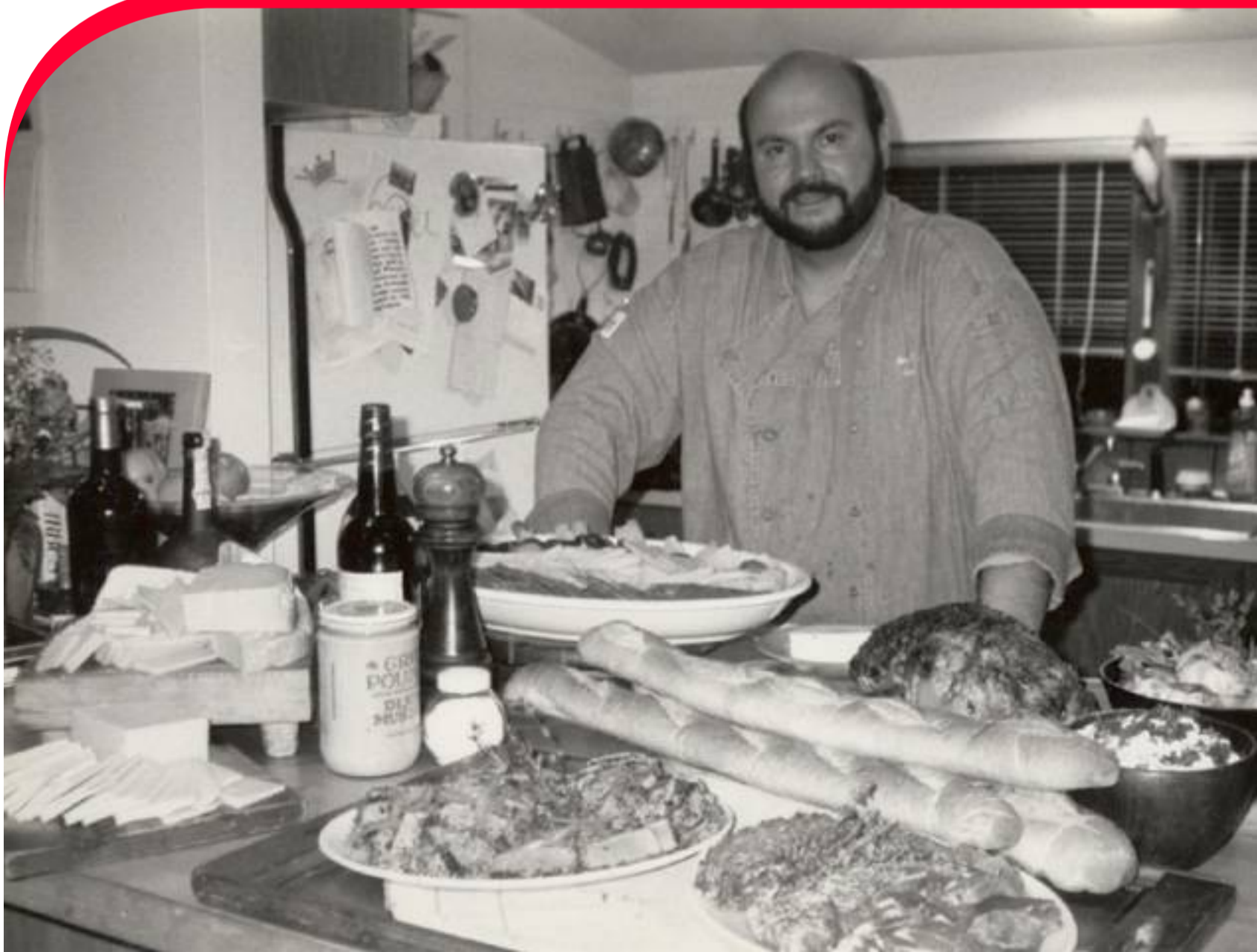


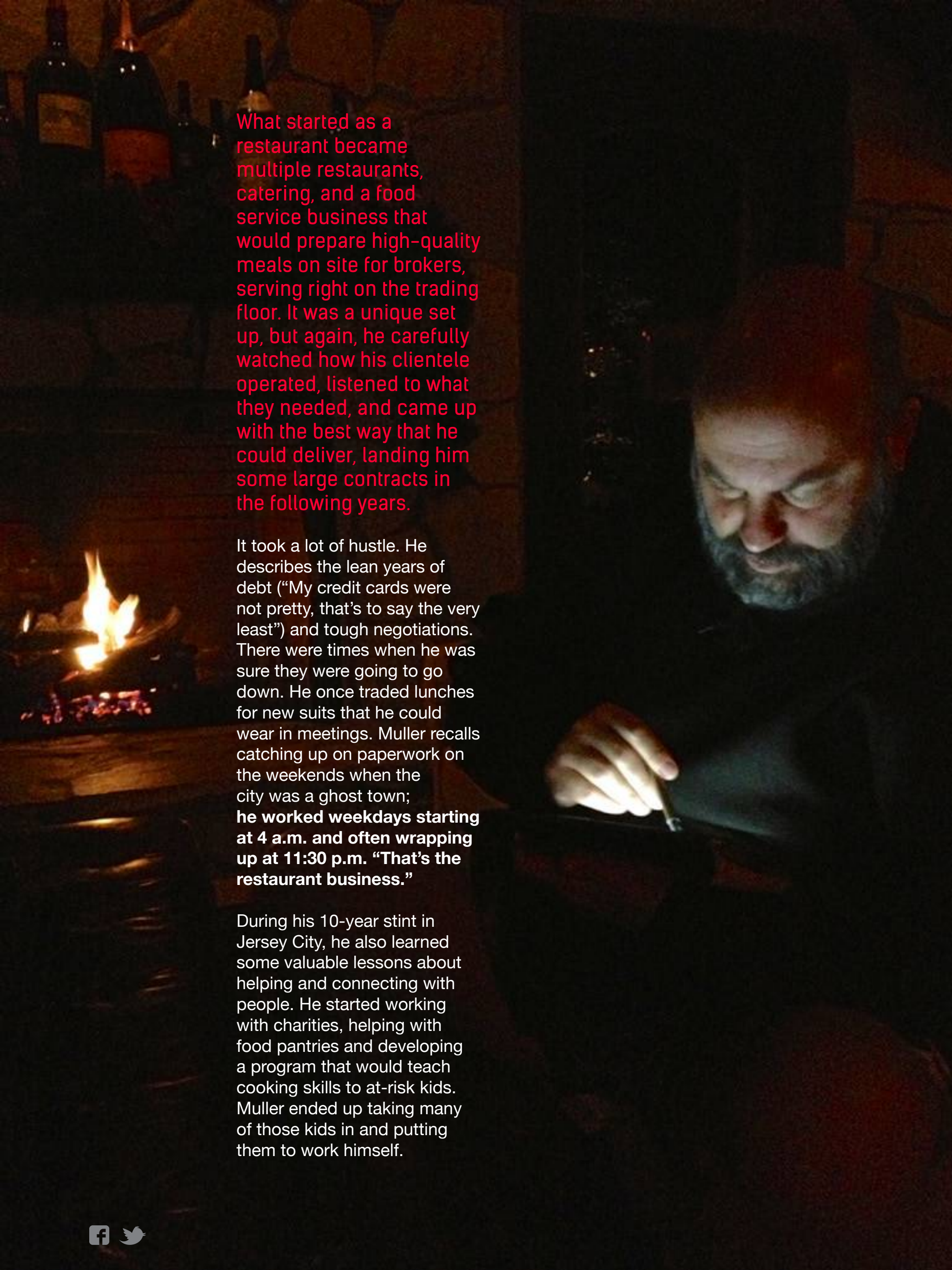
## SUCCESS STORY

**H**is first restaurant was four blocks from Wall Street in Manhattan in the early 1980s, when he was still pretty green and undercapitalized. He did OK, but like so many restaurants, it didn't last too long. Muller spent a couple of years working and then saw his next big opportunity, this time across the Hudson in Jersey City. It was around this time that Jersey City was turning into "Wall Street West" as financial institutions were taking advantage of affordable real estate and turning it into a major banking center.

So Muller did what would become a running theme in his work — he saw a need and moved to fill it, but with tremendous zeal and care for quality service and product.

"We listened. We listened to the brokers, what did they want, what did they need. There weren't enough restaurants. There wasn't enough for them. And certainly the big catering firms that would normally take care of Wall Street, they didn't want to come over there. They saw it as an imposition ... which flabbergasted me at the moment," Muller says. "I said, sure, we can feed you."





What started as a restaurant became multiple restaurants, catering, and a food service business that would prepare high-quality meals on site for brokers, serving right on the trading floor. It was a unique set up, but again, he carefully watched how his clientele operated, listened to what they needed, and came up with the best way that he could deliver, landing him some large contracts in the following years.

It took a lot of hustle. He describes the lean years of debt (“My credit cards were not pretty, that’s to say the very least”) and tough negotiations. There were times when he was sure they were going to go down. He once traded lunches for new suits that he could wear in meetings. Muller recalls catching up on paperwork on the weekends when the city was a ghost town; **he worked weekdays starting at 4 a.m. and often wrapping up at 11:30 p.m. “That’s the restaurant business.”**

During his 10-year stint in Jersey City, he also learned some valuable lessons about helping and connecting with people. He started working with charities, helping with food pantries and developing a program that would teach cooking skills to at-risk kids. Muller ended up taking many of those kids in and putting them to work himself.

"As cooks we train, we teach. It's what we love to do. We like to take somebody who likes food and say, come in the kitchen. You're going to work really hard, and I'm going to teach you almost everything you need to know. The most important thing is to never finish learning, about food and cooking, about your brigade, about your guests, their wants and desires. I just turned 57 and sometimes feel as if it's all brand new!"

He found that taking the time to invest in people, taking care of them, and teaching them actually made his business stronger, building loyalty and opening up business opportunities. But you can also tell that it sincerely brings Muller joy. He has a warm demeanor about him, and clearly loves talking to people.

**"Without the people there is no business whatsoever, I don't care what you do. Even if you're a solo entrepreneur, there's people you need to talk to. There's people that are in your world, and they're important. They're more important than the actual thing you do, because your thing will not succeed without their input, without their help, without them taking you forward."**

He also made sure to listen to people he admired, and learned from everyone he could. Throughout his career, he's been able to share a cigar with Lee Iacocca, and chat with former Ritz-Carlton President Horst Schulze, who told him just one piece of advice: "Nothing can be broken. No defects, ever. Always has to work."

Muller had a good run in Jersey City, but all good things come to an end, and in this case it was a slowing financial industry that was depleting his base of customers. He had at one point been considering opening up brewpubs modeled after those in the UK, but had to scrap the plan because the timing wasn't right.

"Sometimes you gotta know when to say no."



He started downsizing, which included spending hours calling around and finding jobs for his staff. Around this time, his wife Sylvia, who had been working in media, had fallen victim to downsizing herself.

But the Mullers had learned that in times of adversity, you have to look for the next opportunity, which led them to the purchase of the Mill House Inn. Gary had always wanted to run an inn,

and the couple saw the perfect place up for sale. They pounced, drew up a business plan fast, and in a matter of months closed on the place. Of course, now they needed to make it work, and pretty quickly.

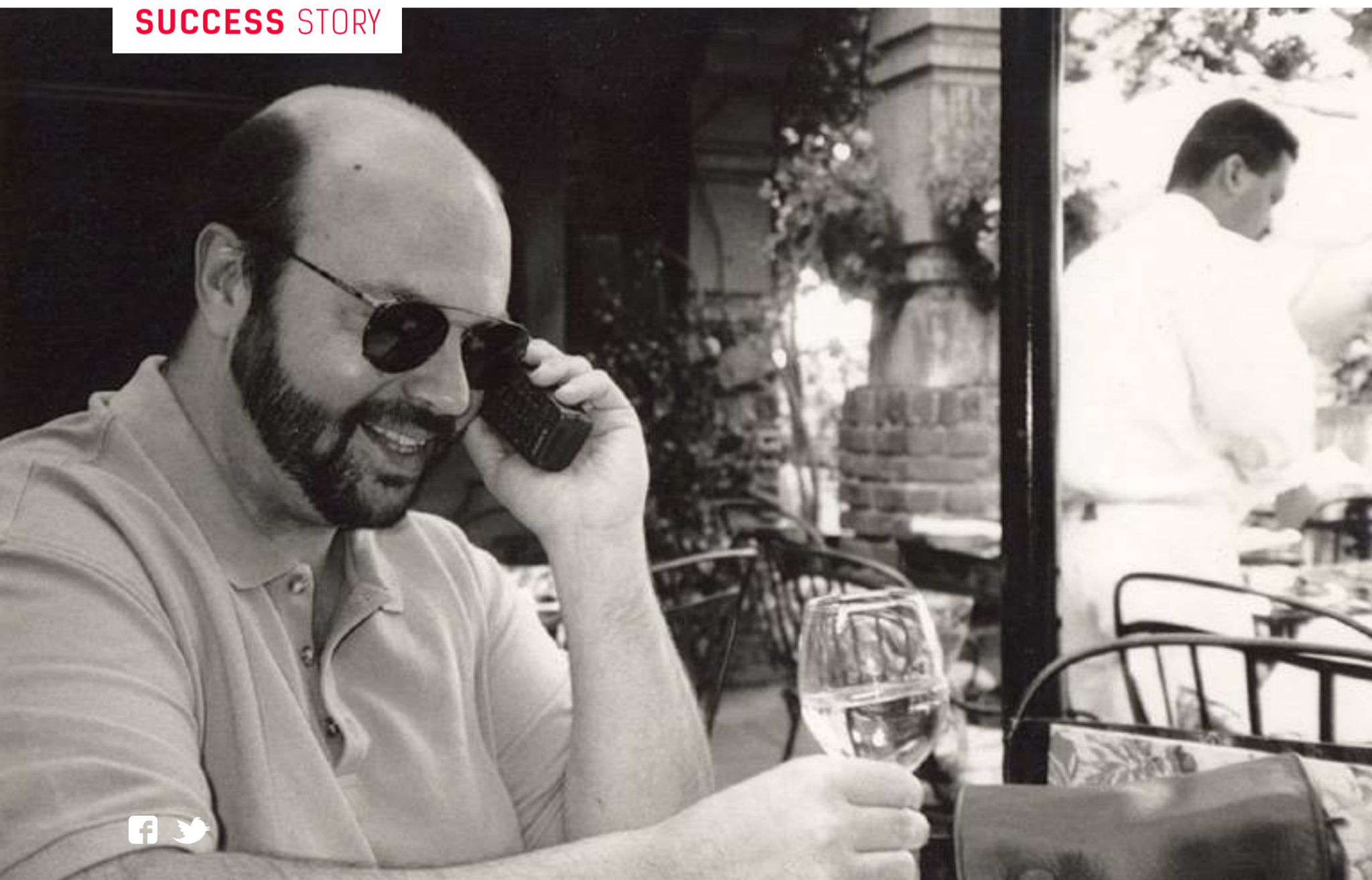
The Mullers' strategy for making the Mill House what it is today sounds deceptively simple — they took out everything they didn't like, and added everything they did. Muller said he had to make it feel like him, even if that meant losing some of the doily decor B&Bs are known for. They added exquisite food and drink, and a rare level of customer service.

"My GM always says it. **As long as it's not illegal, it's done immediately. If it's impossible, I'll get to**

**it tomorrow. But that's hospitality. That's what the mentors taught me."**

And just like with the brokers, he listened carefully. What did people want? What were they not getting other places? What makes a visit special? He takes a long view of customer service. If he can see a family's kids return when they're grown, that's success. If he can point a family with young children to a kid-friendly beach, and see them become ocean enthusiasts over time, that's amazing. Nothing made him happier than getting a call from someone in Germany who said he was planning a trip to New York on advice from a friend, just to stay at the Inn. "I almost fell off the seat in my office."

## SUCCESS STORY



# So what wisdom does Gary Muller have to share with entrepreneurs?

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As we mentioned before, it's all about your team. And that means taking care of them. Don't skimp on the food, breaks, etc. Make them love the product. Make them love the business, and it will show. They'll get to the point where they keep a pad and paper at home to write down new ideas in the middle of the night. And that kind of loyalty can't be achieved with money. Only with caring. Learn the birthdays, the anniversaries, the kids' birthdays. Don't bog them down with paperwork.

Another important tip, crucial in a business with such a high failure rate: do your homework before you "pull the pin." No matter how good you are, the wrong decision will end in failure. A great restaurant in a bad location will tank. So prepare in advance. "Do that analysis of tactics and planning, then go do the work and just keep working."

But his best piece of advice is to learn the power of yes and no. In hospitality, to your client, the answer is always

yes. But to distractions, indulgences, and other side business opportunities that will come up learn to say no.

**"Do the business you're doing. You don't want 10. You want one that's so mind-bogglingly great that everybody talks about you. Then you might think about two."**

## SUCCESS STORY



# GARY MULLER'S ADVICE ON COOKING GREAT FOOD

**We couldn't write about a chef and restaurateur without a few cooking tips, now could we? Well fortunately for you utensil-impaired, Muller's advice is simpler than you might expect. Granted, you might not make it into Zagat's like the Mill House Inn's famed breakfast, but you can create a fine meal with just a few important tips:**

1. Buy "really, seriously good food." It might seem obvious, but ingredients matter.
2. "Take care of that food." If it's a piece of fish, take care of it, clean it, dry it, put it on ice until it's time to cook.
3. "When you cook it, don't do much to it. Because that piece of fish will be perfect."

There you have it, a master chef on how to make high-quality food in just three sentences.



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**Tate Williams** is a freelance writer based in Boston covering science, culture and the environment. His work has appeared in a variety of publications, including The Magazine, Curbed, the East Bay Express, the East Valley Tribune in Phoenix, and American Forests magazine. He's the science editor at Inside Philanthropy, where he blogs regularly.

