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Second Course

Nancy Silverton is the high priestess of L.A. dining—turns out her landmark success was just the appetizer

by TINA DIRMANN /photograph by ROBERT MAXWELL /styling by BRANDON PALAS /produced by HANNAH HARTE

Just two years ago, chef Nancy Silverton was riding high. Her eateries—Campanile, La Brea Bakery, Osteria Mozza, Pizzeria Mozza—had made her a very successful woman. A wealthy woman. But one sunny afternoon, as she drove through the hills of Napa Valley’s wine country, intent on treating pals to a decadent nine-course meal at the French Laundry, a phone call to her father changed everything.

“It’s all gone,” Larry Silverton told his daughter bluntly. “The whole Madoff thing is a fraud.”

Silverton had invested her entire fortune—\$5 million—with Bernie Madoff, the Ponzi-scheme king who robbed thousands of investors of more than \$50 billion.

“Really?” she kept asking, shock searing through her. “You’re sure—it’s all gone?”

The news was so hard to digest, Silverton still insisted on taking her pals to dinner over their protestations. “I still have the \$2,500 receipt,” she says with a wry smile.

Eventually the harsh reality of Madoff hit her—she had no nest egg to fall back on. Silverton was broke.

“Even if I wanted to retire, I could not,” Silverton says wistfully, standing in the vacant dining room of Osteria, preparing for the dinner rush. “I’m just like every other

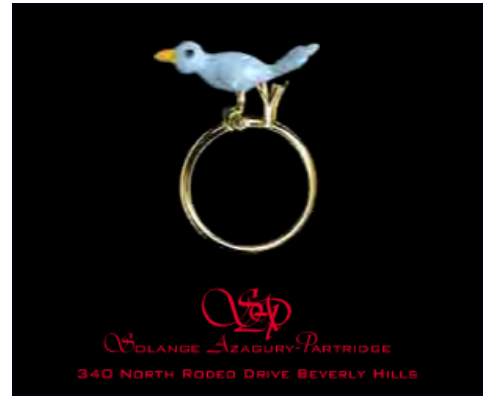


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American today—working paycheck to paycheck.”

At 56, Nancy Silverton is starting over.

Good thing, then, that Silverton simply loves her job. Because after a lifetime of success, when she should be kicking back and resting on her laurels, she’s working harder than ever. Her ambitions now reach all the way to Singapore, where she’ll open a second Pizzeria Mozza, in the new Marina Bay Sands hotel, this December. Construction starts this month on the third Pizzeria Mozza, in Newport Beach, and negotiations are under way for a possible fourth in San Diego. If that weren’t enough, there’s the prospect of becoming TV’s next chef darling—she’s awaiting word if a cooking-related pilot she shot for Bravo will be picked up.

With all that on her plate, maybe it’s understandable that another major project slips her mind. “Right,” she says when reminded. “LAX. Forgot that one.” Seems the Los Angeles City Council, anxious to unveil more upscale dining choices for travelers, is considering Silverton to launch a new quick-serve Italian eatery at the airport.

As she speaks, Silverton’s slight frame is poised in a dining-room chair, mounds of curly hair piled into a tight bunch above her head, a sign that indicates serious cooking is about to commence. She could be bitter about working so much so late in life, struggling to rebuild a fortune that normally comes, well, once in a lifetime.

She’s not.

“I really do feel like the stars look after me,” she says. “You know, when it happened, people would try to comfort me by saying, ‘You’ll make it back and then some.’ I know they were trying to make me feel good. But they sensed I somehow would do that. And I’m confident I will make it back, too. Not because I have to. I just will.”

Silverton doesn’t have to convince her peers in the elite culinary world. “Nancy would have evolved anyway,” notes chef Amy Pressman, who earned her cooking chops alongside Silverton as a pastry chef at Spago 30 years ago, before moving on to open her own flourishing business, Old Town Bakery, in Pasadena.

In fact, Pressman has so much faith in Silverton’s abilities she has tapped her chum to collaborate on the menu for a restaurant she’s launching in March at the Original Farmers Market. Short Order, a casual burger joint with anything but a casual-burger-joint menu, will offer options from beef to duck to tofu.

“I trust Nancy 100 percent, because she lives her craft,” Pressman says. “She is a consummate artist in the culinary world. And successful artists—from Madonna to anyone with a long breadth of success—reinvent themselves. People may see this about Nancy more because the Madoff thing put a spotlight on it, but she’s always seeking, learning, growing.”

And taking risks.

Silverton has never been afraid to go out on a ledge to get what she wants. And when she started cooking way back in college, what she wanted was a boy.

“I got into cooking when I was at Sonoma State but not for my love of food,” she recalls. “For Billy Hawley. He was so handsome.” He was a goateed, chanting-obsessed Buddhist in Birkenstocks. “He seemed so exotic to this Valley girl,” Silverton recalls. He was also a strict vegetarian and ran a meal program for students. She volunteered to work in the kitchen alongside her beloved, swearing she, too, was a non-meat eater. “I wasn’t,” she sheepishly admits.

At the time, her untrained palate loved creamed tuna on toast, Swanson TV dinners and anything on Denny’s late-night menu. She picked up a vegetarian cookbook, but that didn’t make her a chef: Her sautéed vegetables were soggy; she dumped cheese on everything; and her lentil loaves repelled even the sharpest knives.

Somehow, in the middle of all that bad cooking, Silverton had “a life-changing moment.”

This is it, she thought back in 1972, standing in the school kitchen. *This is what I want to do.*

Hawley the crush ran off and married another. She was heartbroken, but her new craft helped her heal. In fact, food became her new love. Weeks before her senior finals, Silverton dropped out and enrolled in London's prestigious Le Cordon Bleu, where her performance was mediocre. "I was a solid C student," she says. "And desserts...I did the worst in that."

And yet shortly after graduation, Silverton was working at Michael's in Santa Monica—as a pastry chef. She did so well it was not long before another young chef making a splash on the culinary scene, Wolfgang Puck, offered her head pastry chef at his new place. It was a gamble to leave the flourishing Michael's for the then unknown Spago, opening on the Sunset Strip in 1982. But Silverton had another incentive—husband-to-be Mark Peel would be chef de cuisine. In 1989, Peel and Silverton opened Campanile on La Brea. Almost as an afterthought, Silverton decided to bake fresh bread for their dinner guests and sell loaves as a side business.

No matter that Silverton wasn't a baker, even after completing a fancy bread-making class in France. "I underestimated how hard baking bread would be," she says, forehead wrinkling in mock despair while recalling her early failures to create the perfect loaf. "They all told me you can't make proper bread in the United States. You don't have the right flour, you don't have the right water."

"She worked so hard," her father, Larry, recalls. "She'd get so frustrated. But day after day, she kept at it." After six months of tossing out breads that were too hard, too flat, too soft on the outside and too crispy in the middle, she nailed it.

Silverton, Pressman recalls, then worried no one would pay the hefty price tag she needed on her freshly baked artisan breads to cover her overhead.

"I can't charge \$6.45 for a loaf of raisin bread," Pressman recalls Silverton saying. "But she did. And it sold. People paid whatever cost she put on that bread, because it was that good."

Soon, what was meant to be the side business, La Brea Bakery, took on a life of its own. Eleven years later, she and Peel sold the business for a whopping \$55 million. There were debts to be paid and investors entitled to big shares. But in the end, Silverton cleared about \$5 million.

"I could have retired then and lived modestly," she says. "But I thought I'd be very bored. Instead, I kept working and decided to find someone good to invest my money with."

When her marriage to Peel fell apart, Silverton left Campanile and, four years ago, launched Osteria Mozza and, next door, the lower-key Pizzeria Mozza with Mario Batali and his partner Joe Bastianich.

Then came the Madoff scandal. On paper, her investment had grown to roughly \$9 million, Silverton says. Of course, she's practical enough to realize much of the money she "lost," wasn't real. "Phantom money," she calls it, since returns were fabricated. Still, the loss hurt.

Maybe, she says, that's why she's now pushing herself so hard. "I wonder if I would be

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stretching myself so much if I still had all that in the bank.”

There’s not a trace of anger or regret. Silverton wants no revenge. She refused, for example, to join in a lawsuit that might have recouped some funds. Instead, she wishes to move on. And when speaking of herself, she uses a word some might consider ill suited for someone who lost a fortune—lucky.

“When I lost it all, I kept telling myself one thing—at least I had a job,” she says. “I still had Mozza. And every two weeks, I was getting a paycheck.”

She also has a new cookbook coming out (her eighth), based on the recipes at Mozza. She’s still a consultant for La Brea Bakery breads, now sold in 17 countries. And today, while expanding her foodie empire, she is clearly both reinvesting and reinventing.

“Well, it’s not a total reinvention,” Silverton says. “I’m still doing what I’ve done my whole life—the restaurant business. And I truly do love it.”

No one understands Silverton’s thinking better than the man who has been with her through it all—her dad (whom she affectionately calls “Daddio”). The elder Silverton knew he had a fighter on his hands when, as a scrawny 10-year-old, little Nancy struggled to peddle a bicycle up a steep slope along Sepulveda Boulevard. As she lagged behind the group, Larry shook his head, thinking his daughter was being lazy.

“But she kept riding, and she eventually made it,” he says. “Then I realized—poor thing, she had a bent tire on that bike, and it was rubbing against the frame the whole time. And you know, she never said a word. She never complained. She just kept pumping away. That’s my Nancy—never a quitter.”

TINA DIRMANN is an author and journalist who has written for the Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, Us Weekly and E! Online.

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