



Vivian Kouvant

Sarasota
Benefactor
and
Connoisseur
of Life

A native of Denmark, Vivian came to the U.S. to work at the 1964 New York World's Fair where she met her future husband. The couple lived in New York City where her husband, Murray, had Christo's Steak House in midtown Manhattan.

Christo's became a haven for actors, artists and celebrities such as Ava Gardner, Maria Callas, Burt Bacharach, Ray Milland, Jerry Lewis, Shecky Green, Louis Armstrong, Tom Jones, Imelda Marcos, Liza Minnelli and Buddy Hackett (and many more). Stephen Sondheim penned "A Little Night Music" while at their NYC restaurant.

After 45 years in New York the couple moved to Sarasota in 1981. She and Murray enjoyed 10 years together in Sarasota before he passed away. But she is always busy dining out, attending concerts and shows and serving on many committees planning fundraisers for organizations like The Sarasota Ballet, The Sarasota Orchestra and Jewish Family and Children's Services – to name a few. You've heard this before: this area draws people from all over the country and the world, many with diverse backgrounds and interesting careers. They "retire" here and morph into this area's generous benefactors and cheerleaders. Vivian is no exception.

“I’m basically a happy person,” she says, sitting comfortably in the living room of her beautiful downtown Sarasota condo. I kind of already knew that since not a single picture or post on her Facebook page ever mentions anything negative.

I’d “met” Vivian in a very modern day way: Facebook. I’m not sure how we “connected” there, but I was quickly enthralled reading her posts. Like many others there in FB land, I’d find myself reading her describe what might seem mundane (her Sunday morning ritual) as a delight to read. I can almost imagine her sipping her favorite double espresso (“with a twist of lemon”). I know, it sounds a bit unusual. But she posts such wonderful evenings out in Sarasota and New York, and dines on wonderful food and drinks top shelf wine. Her food plate photos are luxurious and prompted me to tap in under one of her posts, “How do you stay so slim with such lovely meals?” She replied and explained that she does enjoy gourmet food, but eats small portions.

So now I had the chance to meet the elegant Vivian in person. And she is just as gracious as she is online. And yes, trim and fit—gourmet postings aside—no cyber cheating on appearances. Turns out she has indeed lived a fascinating life. Like many generous people, she isn’t one to toot her own horn, but after (again) reading her FB page, I know she loves and supports the Sarasota Ballet, Jewish Family & Children’s Services and the Sarasota Orchestra. She was on the Sarasota Orchestra Board for 15 years, but now contributes by being on various nonprofits’ committees planning galas and parties.

She is a native of Denmark, but came to the U.S. to work at the 1964 New York World’s Fair where she would also meet her future husband. Prior to 1981, she lived in New York City where her husband, Murray, had Christo’s Steak House in midtown Manhattan (on East 49th Street near Lexington). It was near the Waldorf Astoria where Frank Sinatra was holed up for a time while “keeping company” with Ava Gardner (that is, while he was married to someone else). This is one of the many anecdotes she shares since Christo’s became a haven for actors, artists and various celebrities. It sounds so glamorous – talking with Ava (Gardner, that is), or chatting with Maria Callas, Burt Bacharach, Ray Milland, Jerry Lewis, Shecky Green, Louis Armstrong, Tom Jones, Imelda Marcos (no doubt in town for some more shoes), Liza Minnelli and Buddy Hackett (and many more).

Most she found delightful, but some – less so, but you’ll have to head to what she calls “the Gossip Lounge” at the Bijou Café in Sarasota for details. She smiles and laughs at the name, but she does enjoy good chat and her favorite place for that is at the Bijou. For example, she told me that Stephen Sondheim

penned “A Little Night Music” while at their NYC restaurant. He was always writing things down, she recalls. Sondheim later wrote in Time magazine how sad he was to see the couple leave New York.

After 45 years, Murray had enough of the restaurant business with its grueling hours and the couple moved to Sarasota. Their love of fine dining led them to the Bijou Café where they took an interest in a young fellow named J.P. Knaggs who had opened the Bijou Café in 1986. According to Vivian, Murray would enjoy popping into the kitchen to say hello. According to J.P. Knaggs, owner of the Bijou Café, “Murray’s advice was ‘Hang in there, kid’ and I took it to heart...32 years later still hanging,” says J.P.

“I was tied to the range back in those early days and Murray, being a well-known restaurateur, knew how busy I was in the kitchen, so he would pop in and ask me how everything was going. He was very appreciative and understood the craziness of busy kitchens so he didn’t hang out and chat for long, but he always said hello and goodbye and thanks. I don’t know of another customer in all the 32 years since who has done that.”

And Vivian still enjoys the Bijou – she has her favorite table and knows everyone from staff to manager on a first name basis. J.P. remembers, “being awestruck by the beauty of this woman who was also charming, friendly and had an intriguing accent. Over the years she has remained just as beautiful and just as charming.” He sees Vivian as someone “with an absolute positive outlook on the world. She has the extraordinary gift of lighting up a room by her very presence yet she doesn’t see herself on a pedestal so she never looks down on anybody.”

She and Murray enjoyed 10 years together in Sarasota before he passed away. But she is always busy dining out, attending concerts and shows (yep, you guessed it – I read that on Facebook, too). When not in Sarasota, Vivian is often in New York City visiting with her daughter, Jennifer Kouvant, whose Facebook page shows that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Jennifer owns Six Duchess Farm in Dutchess County, N.Y. Visit Jennifer’s page and you’ll see even more beautiful images of gourmet food. Vivian also has a son, David, who works for International Design Source in Sarasota.

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Despite all the yammering about politics, you can meet the nicest people on Facebook; I know because I just did. 🗣

🎧 STORY: Louise Bruderle

🎧 IMAGES: Evelyn England

🎧 SHOT at the Bijou Café in Sarasota