

Karen BELL

Keeping the Cortez Tradition Alive

Owner,
A. P. Bell
Fish Company

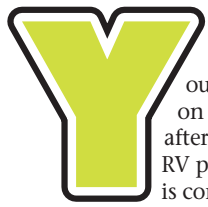
Owner,
Star Fish Company
and Tide Tables

The Cortez native is the owner of **Star Fish Company** that's right on the water in Cortez where she runs a popular restaurant and seafood store. Just next door is the **A.P. Bell Fish Company** that's a fishing wholesaler that has a fleet of fishing boats.

Yep, she owns all of those. Closer to the bridge there's **Tide Tables restaurant**, which she owns with her partner, Bobby Woodson.

Fishing has been in her family since the 1940s and she is one of the few women anywhere to own and operate a commercial fishing company.





ou get there by going west on Cortez Rd., passing block after block of strip malls and RV parks. You know the island is coming and you're relieved to know you'll cross over a bridge and see more than another strip mall. But if you slow down and look to your left just before the bridge, you'll see Cortez.

Cortez is a fishing village that goes back to the 1880s and in the year 2017 fishermen still take their boats out to catch fish to make a living. And Karen Bell's company often buys it. But that's not all she does. Her Star Fish Company is right on the water in Cortez where she runs a popular restaurant and seafood store. Just next door to the west is the A.P. Bell Company that's a fishing wholesaler that has a fleet of fishing boats. Yep, she owns all of those. Closer to the bridge there's Tide Tables restaurant, which she owns with partner Bobby Woodson.

Star Fish Company has been written up (glowingly) by Travel + Leisure Travel + Leisure magazine (they named it one of the 15 best seafood restaurants in the country) and Condé Nast magazines as well as the New York Times. Even TV foodie Emeril Lagasse visited (and ordered a po boy, of course). It's dining al fresco on picnic tables an arm's length from the water.

The menu usually includes snapper, grouper, stone crab, shrimp and mullet—the local catch—as well as oysters and salmon that come from other waters. And it'll be served grilled, fried or blackened. No heavy sauces to mask that super fresh fish. Her restaurants make their own tartar sauce and cole slaw and the hush puppies taste so good because they use corn flour and let them rise for 20 minutes before deep-frying.

Star Fish Company was started in the early '20s by Judge Millis. The Garners purchased the business in the 1950s with both father and then son running the business before selling to Karen in 1996. They had gone into foreclosure and Karen offered to buy it, but banks were reluctant to offer her a loan since restaurants are considered risky. Smart woman that she is, she went to a third bank and said she wanted a loan for a fish market. She then opened the restaurant and it's been going strong ever since—judging by the lines and word-of-mouth raves.

If you're not mesmerized by peel 'n eat shrimp alone, you'll find a beautiful setting on northern Sarasota Bay edged by mangrove islands, Jewish Key, Longboat Key and Bradenton Beach. Next door to the restaurant and the market is A.P. Bell where the boats are docked and the catch comes in, is processed, packed on ice then shipped out. On the first floor is where Karen's office is. There are all kinds of memorabilia around from when her dad ran the company and she sits behind a traditional steel desk. Some people get a corner office. This boss gets a view of the water just behind her desk.

Taking in the entire operation it begs the observation, "You must be really busy" which she replies, "I get asked that a lot," pauses then adds, "I don't think of it as work." Indeed, for running such an operation it is tranquil today and she is not casting too many glances at her cell phone or sneaking a look at her watch. Besides, Karen believes you should always "like what you do."

Karen's grandfather, Aaron Parx Bell, started the company in 1940. She didn't know him, but knows he came from North Carolina, as did many Cortezians, as they're called. Karen's grandmother, Jessie Blanche Fulford Bell, was from Florida, but Jessie's parents were from NC. Karen's dad, Walter Bell, ran the business until 2012 when he passed. He grew up in Cortez and went to school in what is now the Maritime building right on Cortez Rd.

Karen went away to college at the University of Florida (but Gainesville was "too big" she felt) and then graduated from Florida Atlantic University on the east coast. She was seriously considering a business career and particularly enjoyed time spent working for IBM but something...happened...She told her dad she wanted to come home and work in the family business. He wasn't entirely encouraging. "It's a man's world," he told her. A lot of good say-

ing that did. So they worked together some 26 years. Karen has cut fish, cleaned bathrooms, run a forklift and done the paperwork.

Oddly enough as a child Karen preferred land creatures – namely horses and fondly recalls riding her bike to the barn to ride. But she also remembers when her mother would drop her off at her grandmother's. Supper was at 1 p.m. and a large family would gather. As for the fish business, "At the time I hated it."

Karen bought out some cousins to acquire A.P. Bell majority ownership, but the business is set up as a trust to keep it in the family. Her uncle works there on occasion and she's encouraging her niece, Lindsey, to get involved in the business. After a lot of explaining, it seems everyone is related to someone in the village of Cortez. If not related, then they may work for Karen since she owns over 20 properties and rents them to fishermen.

Karen has 28 employees and works with over 100 fishermen at A.P. Bell; 24 at Star Fish Company and 33 at Tide Tables, which opened in late 2014. The latter had seen four restaurants start and fail, but she and her partner Bobby Woodson (son of Marlene Woodson-Howard) were the first to have made it successful.

Her typical day starts at 6:30 a.m. or so and she's at the office by 8, timed to be there for the unloading of the day's catch. But sometimes things run as late as 10 at night. No problem, she lives just two blocks away in Cortez. Some days she calls people when the boats come in, selling and alerting clients and starting the international exporting side of the business. Some of the catch has gone to France and Italy. Often it's mullet roe – now called botarga (or bottarga, the Italian name for a delicacy of salted, cured fish roe, typically of the grey mullet).

Some 1800 pounds of the Florida "caviar" went out recently to San Francisco and New York. "This little village is so far-reaching. We have customers all over the world." A.P. Bell has 10 boats running. Since they can't possibly meet the demands at the restaurant, they buy shrimp, clams, salmon, and oysters.

In addition to her home in Cortez, Karen has a home on the river in Homosassa, north of Tampa. She likes to cook when there's time and as for seafood; mullet is her favorite. As for eating out – she prefers to go where they offer her fish. Not out of any loyalty so much as she knows the quality. So that means Captain Brian's, Blue Marlin on Bridge Street in Bradenton, and Ocean Star Sushi also in Bradenton.

Her restaurant and all of Cortez have had hard times, too, like when citizens voted in 1994 to limit gill netting. Her company was diversified enough that it survived in part because they added an offshore fleet in the 1970s. The 2010 BP oil spill hurt business, too, as consumers feared (inaccurately) that they'd be eating tainted products. In other interviews it's been noted that A.P. Bell hauls in 500,000 pounds of grouper and 1 million pounds of mullet a year (plus a lot of gulf shrimp, pompano and stone crab).

Oh, and as for that ride you'll NOW be taking to Cortez, be sure to notice its unassuming "neighbor" to the east just before you turn off Cortez Rd for some peel 'n eat shrimp. That's a 95-acre nature preserve. "It's one of the last mangrove forests in Florida," Karen explains.

Karen has long served on what is called the F.I.S.H Board (The Florida Institute for Saltwater Heritage). The Board sought out the owner of the land to see if they could purchase it, and after some negotiations as well as a fundraising drive that asked 10 people to put up \$2500—Karen being one of them—they had the land.

Thus 70 acres of mangrove and 20 acres of uplands (land above sea level) were forever kept from being developed. The land is rare and valuable in its natural state. It helps buffer the mainland from hurricanes and incubates small fish that in turn feed birds. The plan is to remove all exotic or invasive plants and make trails. Best of all, this daughter of Cortez has done her part in giving back for what has been her family's livelihood. 🌿

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