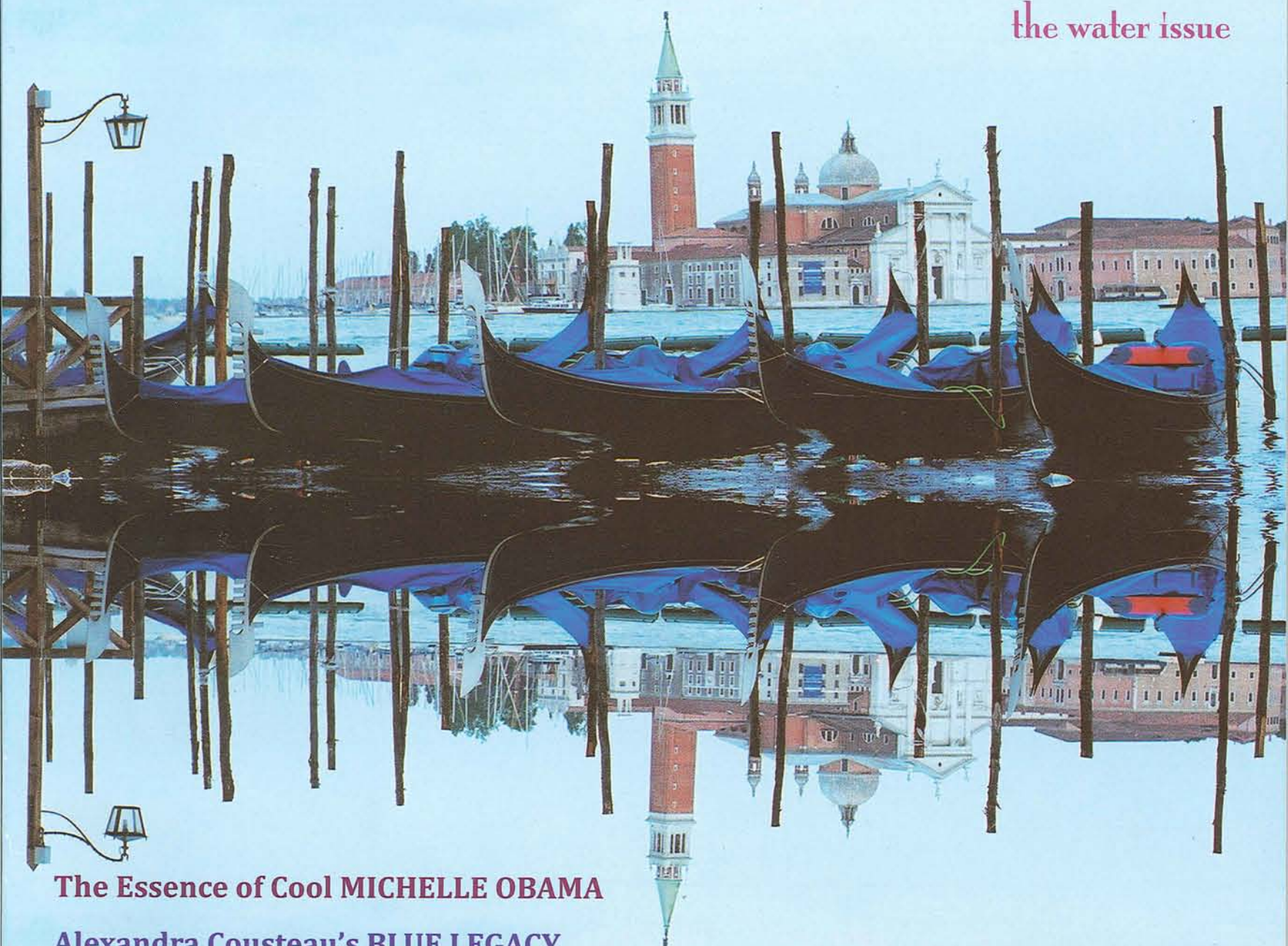


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Women at the Helm

Story by Barbara Lehman Smith

Photos by L.A. Brown

Our series by Barbara Lehman Smith about women in restaurant partnerships continues with Colleen McAndrews of Offshore Ale in Oak Bluffs, one of Martha's Vineyard harbor towns.



Of Faith, Food, and Date Nights

Hours before opening one Monday morning, music reverberates through Offshore Ale Company, where a few employees work steadily to prep for the day ahead. Somehow the cavernous Oak Bluffs restaurant that seats eighty eight (and on warmer days, another twenty two outside on the patio) still manages to convey the friendly intimacy of a smaller pub-like setting. Maybe it's the open kitchen; the visible, second-story, stainless-steel beer vats bordered by a railing of flags; the silver-tip dartboards sidelined with chalk-written announcements promoting "Live Music" for Jazz or Irish nights;

or the hand-tacked photos alongside the boards, of customers whose faces display varying degrees of happiness. Even the floor, which looks like it has been strewn with confetti but is actually covered with cracked peanut-shells, suggests something fun has been going on. But the welcoming feel of this award-winning micro-brew pub goes beyond aesthetics to what a customer recently described as "real."

Colleen McAndrews, who co-owns Offshore Ale with her husband Phil, is the pilot light to all this warmth, and she believes in real. Today

that means she will come through the door and up the stairs to her office, having squeezed in an hour to talk, between work and shuttling her four children—ages ten to sixteen—to various activities. The impetus for this full life as a restaurateur, mother, and wife was a romantic weekend getaway to the resort island of Martha's Vineyard with her husband in 2005.

Originally from Hamburg, New York, Colleen Gillen met New Jersey native Phil McAndrews at St. Bonaventure University in southwestern New York. She was majoring in business

management and he had just graduated from the same program. They married in 1991 and eventually moved to Rhode Island to raise their family. Fourteen years and four children later, the couple planned a weekend away that would have them spending one night in Cape Cod and one night on Martha's Vineyard.

"Just a Saturday, overnight," Colleen explains. "We'd never been here, but we like islands." She slows the pace of her speech for emphasis as she recalls how it happened. "On Sunday morning, Phil looked at me and said 'I love this place. Let's move here.' And I'm like, 'Whatever.'" Her inflection indicates she wasn't quite taking him seriously. "Because it's so not like him," she says, "I'm the one who's usually very spontaneous and wanting to do something different."

But, Colleen says, Phil meant business. One week later, he returned to the island with a local business-for-sale directory in hand and an interest in finding a Bed-and-Breakfast. Instead, he saw the opportunity to buy Offshore Ale. Phil had never operated a restaurant before, but Colleen says he felt that with his experience as a supplier for Rhode Island Distributing and her experience in human resources and in employee training and recruitment at a hospital in New Jersey, they'd have a unique edge. By January, only six months since their overnight getaway, they'd sold their home in Rhode Island and purchased a new home—and a restaurant—on Martha's Vineyard.

"Everyone questioned us and told us we were crazy," Colleen recalls with a laugh, admitting that even family had doubts. "They thought the business was a good idea but moving the family was a bad decision. People not familiar with the island thought we were moving to a one-room schoolhouse kind of school system. 'Wait until spring,' was all I heard, 'so that the kids could finish out their school year.'" Colleen, who had been heavily involved with the Rhode Island school system for seven years, had her own concerns and dove into learning all she could about the Vineyard's school system. What she found—an educational system that supports about seventeen hundred students with four elementary schools, two middle

schools, and the Martha's Vineyard Regional High School—not only dispelled her concerns but inspired her to volunteer immediately.

In these few years, she's gone from chairing the annual, island-wide Teacher and Staff Appreciation Week, to serving on the island's school advisory committee, to being recently elected to the committee that oversees policies and budgets for the Martha's Vineyard regional school system. "The schools are awesome," she says, and the best part for her is that her kids love it.



Before the move, Colleen, who calls herself a "determined" woman, said she'd finally had enough of the naysayers amongst her family and friends who still disapproved. "I said, 'You know what? If Phil's going to do this, we are going to support him as a family and do it one hundred percent. There's not going to be any regrets or looking back. We're going to do it now. Why wait?'" Colleen also credits her faith, having been raised Roman Catholic, as playing a huge role in her decision-making process. "A lot of people aren't willing to take risks until they have some type of guarantee, which doesn't happen very often." But she believed in her husband and his dream and, she says, "the only way it was going to work was for him to have his family's support and faith, completely and unconditionally."

January marks the onset of the couple's fifth year as proprietors of what frequent customers

call "the peanut place," because of the large barrels of unshelled peanuts in the entryway next to a stack of self-serve baskets. It's the custom of encouraging customers to discard the shells on the floor that makes peanuts one of Offshore Ale's signatures—along with the brick-oven, fresh oysters, and celebrated burger from meat ground daily by the butcher down the street—and contributes to the warm vibe. Colleen says they fittingly refer to the shells-on-the-floor tradition as a "labor of love" for the daily chore of sweeping, mopping, and then sprinkling a layer of wood chips over the floor to "start" the process. If they forget the last step, Phil says, "People will ask, 'Can we still throw the shells on the floor?'"

As to Offshore Ale's slew of awards and recommendations—from *Boston Herald* hailing it as having "possibly the best pale ale in New England," to England's *Times of London* naming it "best spot of the island"—Colleen and Phil direct attention away from themselves. They credit Offshore's head brewer Neil Atkins for his expertise in "taking us to a different level," and manager Glen Caldwell for his seamlessness in keeping order. Not an easy task, with a restaurant staff of twenty-five to as many as thirty-five in the peak season and with an open kitchen that uses neither microwave ovens nor pre-heats dishes.

Colleen wants Offshore Ale to be a place where "parents can exhale" while the kids are comfortable too. "We've trained our staff to bring out an Etch A Sketch or Uno if they see kids getting a little impatient. I mean, they're kids," she says, with a mother's knowing laugh. "But we are not just a date-night place, and we're not just a family-night place, or just a micro-brew pub, we're everything." And as this dynamic businesswoman heads down the stairs and into her day, it's clear she has everything under control. ❖

AVALON contributing writer Barbara Lehman Smith is the author of the biography *Elizabeth Sparhawk-Jones: The Artist Who Lived Twice* (Outskirts Press, 2010) and writes freelance for various magazines and newspapers. A native of Massachusetts, Barbara lives in Maryland with her husband and three children.