

The accidental fish monger

Dundarave Fish Market owner Kim Hurford VanSickle dreamed of going to cooking school in Paris, but instead wound up on a fishing boat in Prince Rupert.



GONE FISHING - Kim Hurford VanSickle recently launched a signature line of seafood sauces, including a shrimp-friendly 'Swingin' cocktail sauce,' which uses her dad's recipe. 'I just remember him in the kitchen, big cigar in his mouth, the drink rattling, and he's whisking the mayonnaise, horseradish, lemon juice, some hot sauce,' says VanSickle. *Greg Hoekstra photo*

A photo of a 20-something Kim Hurford VanSickle dwarfed by a 100-pound halibut – a hook torn through its mouth, and blood streaking down its white, elongated underbelly – sits on an immaculate table setting at her upscale Dundarave seafood eatery.

The dress shirt and dazzling bejeweled necklace that she's wearing on this Thursday morning, as part of her overall polished appearance, do a fine job of disguising VanSickle's early years as a commercial fisherwoman off the coast of Prince Rupert.

"I haven't been back there in 25 years," she says, with a tinge of nostalgia in her voice.

As the staff bustles around a seated VanSickle, stocking up on ice and adjusting their aprons in preparation for opening, she is transported back to those days on the docks of that coastal fishing community and tells the story of how she became the accidental fish monger.

It's hard to imagine that a teenaged VanSickle would have been inspired to challenge B.C.'s choppy ocean waters, growing up in the Toronto suburb of Etobicoke.

All VanSickle knew at that time was that she wasn't happy in Toronto and that she needed an escape plan. Recruiters from an alternative school in the northern reaches of the country – the Yukon Territory – preyed upon her desire for a change of scenery.

Leaving her displeased parents behind back east, VanSickle made the decision to complete her senior year of high school in Carcross, Yukon and she would also have to foot the bill herself.

When she graduated, she had her heart set on going to cooking school in Paris, France. Although now VanSickle admits that Paris itself was probably the most alluring part about the plan.

"I was just young," she says, smiling.

Her first lesson: learning from the world's culinary elite in Paris does not come cheap. Grudgingly, she made her way back to Toronto and worked in a bank for a year to start raising some capital for tuition.

Desperate to get to Paris as soon as possible, VanSickle gave all of her hard earned money to her dad to invest in the stock market.

"It was oil in Iran, or gold," she painfully recalls. "My friend said gold, my dad said oil. I lost it all."

VanSickle's next get-rich-quick plan came about after somebody told her to go to Prince Rupert and get on a fish boat – "you will make a lot of money fishing."

"So I hitchhiked from the Yukon to Prince Rupert in -20 degree weather with a draft dodger," she says. "And started walking the docks and got on a few fish boats."

There were some bad boats with mean skippers that didn't take too kindly to the fact that she was a woman and that she had oversold her cooking skills.

Still, VanSickle weathered the storm and was going on her third season when destiny struck. The young woman with the sparkling blue eyes and sandy blond hair had caught the attention of a fisherman from another boat.

"And then before I knew it he was chasing around my boat on the fishing grounds," she recalls fondly. "My skipper knew and he kept trying to run away from this guy, Jim Hurford."

When he finally caught up with her, VanSickle gently rejected him.

"I thought he was cute but I knew I wanted to go to this cooking school and I didn't want to get involved with a guy," she explains. "I said 'no we're leaving to go fishing, but thank you'."

Then the schedule changed, giving VanSickle time for dinner with Hurford. Her skipper warned her that the boat was leaving at 6 a.m. the next morning.

"I didn't make it to the boat at 6 a.m. in the morning," she grins. "All of my stuff was on the dock and he [the skipper] left."

As the sun officially set on her Paris plans, VanSickle accepted Hurford's invitation to sail home with him to Eagle Harbour in West Van. "We tied the boat up, walked down the street, and that's where he lived," she says.

Four months later, they were married and expecting a girl. Two more kids, a boy and another girl, followed.

The stay-at-home mom sold shrimp from her garage in Eagle Harbour. But in the back of her mind, she still wanted something more – her own fish market.

In 1995, when her youngest was in grade one, VanSickle started approaching the owners of the Village Fish Market in Ambleside. "So I used to go in there and ask them if they want to sell it and they would kick me out," she recalls.

And then one day the vegetable people next door told her they heard the owners of the fish market had sold the place. "I said 'What? I wanted to buy it'."

Devastated by the news, VanSickle, along with her husband and brother, talked to the owner of the building who informed them that it wasn't a done deal.

Her persistence would soon pay off; the owner agreed to sell the Village Fish Market to VanSickle, and her brother, Mark, was coming onboard as a partner.

But somewhere between wrapping up customer's fish and stocking the live shellfish tank, that culinary dream kept creeping back into her mind. She slowly started experimenting with the daily catch: first with chowder, next came the sandwiches, then it was sushi.

Seven years later in 2002, VanSickle parted ways with her brother professionally, selling him her half of the business. Her 20-year marriage was also ending at the same time.

As part of her new beginnings, VanSickle had her sights set on creating a new fish market that would be less market and more of a West Coast culinary experience.

The Dundarave Fish Market opened that August with a makeshift staff made up mostly of VanSickle's friends. The food menu was simple: shrimp quesadillas, salmon tacos, and whatever else they could make with a panini grill.

By November, VanSickle and her new business partner, Frank Seabolt, had hired a professional chef that exceeded their expectations. Shaun Spooner was a red seal chef who had recently been behind the culinary creations at Saltire restaurant down the road in Ambleside.

"Now it's getting busier," says VanSickle. "And Shaun said if we put a stove in the back we could expand the menu."

Soon VanSickle was running out of space to seat her customers. She hastily converted an upstairs office into a secluded dining area.

But with only one washroom in the entire restaurant, VanSickle was now in violation of her business licence.

"Any time I would see a bunch of men in suits I would get nervous," she reveals.

It ended up costing her \$300,000 to legally keep the upstairs dining room, which included taking over the lease next door.

Fast forward to present day and VanSickle is at the helm of a successful restaurant that evokes a warm, neighbourhood feel. Patrons can indulge in a desired delicacy or drink at the shucking station, martini bar, heated outdoor patio, or two formal dining areas.

Diana Krall and Elvis Costello are regular customers at the Dundarave Fish Market but "we don't make a fuss," says VanSickle.

She has also created a signature line of seafood sauces called Simply West Coast that are sold in Whole Foods, Urban Fare, Capers, and IGA. The 'swingin' cocktail sauce is her dad's recipe.

"I just remember him in the kitchen, big cigar in his mouth, the drink rattling, and he's whisking the mayonnaise, horseradish, lemon juice, some hot sauce," says VanSickle.

The closest she comes to the ocean these days is looking out at the Baja peninsula from her vacation home in Mexico.

"I've sold so much fish in my life that I'm almost scared to put my foot in the ocean because I think they will come and get me," she laughs.

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