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Todd and Theo
Von Hoffmann

Evergreen fun in the Venice tradition —
with friends, family and Gus the dog

PAGE 12

VENICE

2312

2314



Inside:

Celebrating
Venice Living
PAGE 8

Staying
Connected
PAGE 13

Dine In
PAGE 17

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THEO AND TODD VON HOFFMANN

A history of loving Venice

BY BETTY BAILEY • PHOTOGRAPHY BY SAM DIEPHUIS

Longtime Venice resident Theo Von Hoffmann recalls her first taste of the California lifestyle. “I’ll never forget,” she says. “My sister had given birth to my niece and my mother and I came out here to help. One night, my mom was cooking dinner and had forgotten to get a lemon. I walked into my sister’s back yard and cut a bunch of lemons. I realized I had to live here.”

Today, Theo has her own Venice garden. Like many East Coast expats, she and her husband Todd enjoy the outdoor lifestyle all year long. “That’s the beauty,” says Todd. “We live in the greatest weather in the world. Theo’s garden this year is outstanding.”

The couple’s fall garden features cilantro, zucchini and tomatoes. “I love to garden, I love flowers, I love to grow stuff,” Theo says. “It’s very relaxing for me to get my hands in the dirt.”

This winter, the crops are being swapped for arugula and chive. “Todd built a 10’ x 2’ raised bed in front of the house,” she says. “Thank God I’m married to a very handy man who can build anything.”

“The garden is an endless source of fascination for us,” says Todd. “That, and the ever-present Gus, keep us happy.”

Gus is short for Captain Augustus McCray, the couple’s four-year-old Shetland Sheepdog. “He’s a really sweet dog,” says Theo. “We’re completely in love.”

“He’s just the best,” adds Todd. “He’s so gregarious with the neighborhood and incredibly well mannered. He’s like the mayor of Venice — he’s an ambassador.”

Gus has a lot of company these days — seven turtles, a tortoise and a bullfrog named Chauncey. “I rescued him from the black market and from a cook pot,” says Todd.

“When I married Todd, he had an orange-winged parrot named Olivia,” Theo recalls. “She hated me. If I took out some chips, or made a piece of toast, she would screech. I couldn’t put my finger in her cage or she’d give me a puncture wound.”



They had bees at one point, but that was a surprise. They discovered a hive under a palate in the yard. “David the Bee Man put on suit and pulled out slabs of honeycomb,” says Todd. “It was very citrus flavored because our neighbor has lime and lemon trees and we have cactus flowers, so, it was delicious.” Todd says the bonus beehive was safely transported to Ventura County.

The yard has been a sacred spot since they first moved in, in 1987. They had met two years before. Both were from New York and working with successful agents in the entertainment field. They met at an industry Cinco de Mayo party. “This was an agent’s party,” says Theo. “I didn’t want to go to but — there he was — Mr. Right. I was taken with him immediately — he was such a gentleman. I was so impressed.”

“She knocked me out the minute I met her,” says Todd. “We just kind of fell right in step with one another. It’s been great the whole way.”

“It’s relaxing to get my hands in the dirt”

Daughter Kristina was on the way by the time they moved into their home, which came with a back house built in 1921. “It was 400 square feet. That included a little garage so a model T could come in,” says Todd. “We redid the back house with a buddy’s panelized steel frame building system. It was put together in sections in a factory, then I went down and picked up these panels on a flatbed truck. My buddies put up the panels.” Todd says he was so impressed by the process, he dove into real estate investments. “The idea was building with this panelized system and replacing rundown homes.”

When Kristina was small, Theo stepped away from her hectic career in show biz and took a job with American Oceans Campaign, a non-



profit started by her sister and actor Ted Danson, who were married at the time. Todd also left the industry and culled his childhood memories into a book — *The Big Damn Book of Sheer Manliness*. “My dad was a Missouri boy,” he explains. “We spent all our summers in the Ozarks. We had that every summer, then we had the East Coast, where we would sail. That inspired a coffee table book for guys — a tribute to our dads and uncles who raised us.”

The book, released in 1997 by Todd and his brother Brant, takes a tongue-in-cheek jab at things stereotypically male — sports, dogs, cards, fishing, and guns, to name a few. “I hit this anti-political correctness wave, when it first came out,” he says. “We were in USA Today, did a pilot for the history channel and were flying all over on book tours. It was a lot of fun.”

In 2009, they released a sequel. “Guess what it’s called?” asks Todd. I couldn’t begin to guess. “It’s *The Bigger Damner Book of Sheer Manliness*.”

When modernizing their home, the couple took care to keep the original landscaping intact. “We didn’t want to impose on the yard,”



Family Photo

Todd says. "There was an old-growth guava tree and bougainvillea on both sides of the property, and this cactus that was basically four-feet tall in a pot. Now, it's 30-feet tall and the hummingbirds have found a place to make their nest."

"We've had a pond the whole time," he adds. "Chauncey sits on the side and looks glorious. We had a great blue heron land on our pond at one point. The water came up to his knees."

A recent issue with the pond forced some of the backyard crew indoors, which led to a noisy evening in the Von Hoffmann house. "Chauncey spent the night in the bathtub last night because I had drained the pond," Todd says. "Once that's all fixed, everybody's going to get back out there."

"Chauncey the frog sits by the pond and looks glorious"

Theo is still an avid supporter of the environment, as is her daughter. "Kristina one-upped me and got an environmental degree," she says. "She works with Climate Resolve and she's a certified yoga teacher on the side."

"She and Theo have yoga every week," says Todd.

"God bless her," says Theo. "She's transformed my body."

"Sometimes they just chuck the yoga and sit there with some wine," adds Todd, with a laugh.

Kristina has also picked up one of her father's passions — as a protector of Venice history. "People need to look at Venice like they would Carmel," Todd says. "You've got to have some respect. The qualities of this town are worth preserving. That's why so many people are

fighting for it. We saw the old photographs from 1905. All that public lighting that Abbot Kinney put in was pretty forward thinking."

Todd was on the team that restored the historic Venice sign. "How could you not?" he asks. "The bolts were in the wall. It's just the most natural thing in the world to bring that back. That was rewarding — we get a kick out of it when we drive down there and see people taking photos of it."

"Venice was always the Coney Island of the West," he says. "They held special events and bathing beauty parades to draw people here. The Neptune Festival dates back to the early days of Venice of America."

The annual Venice Mardi Gras parade is another event with roots in those early days. "We have the Windward Krewe," says Todd. "I got some purple tails from a movie prop house."

"I have different colored wigs and beads that I wear," says Theo. "Todd got me into parading and marching down the boardwalk. Eventually, we were asked to be the King and Queen of Mardi Gras. Being with all these great people — shouting out and tossing beads, my friends back east were calling me asking, 'Are you okay? Have you lost your mind?'"

"Venice was always the Coney Island of the West"

Todd was on the volunteer board of directors of the Venice Heritage Museum. "Now, Kristina has replaced me on the board," he says. "She's bringing in the younger generation. That's the only way to do it. You're telling the past to the future."



Family Photo



Family Photo

"She really learned all this from Todd," says Theo, "and she questions him every week. She's a chip off the old block."

"You always have to look for the younger, smarter version of yourself," he adds. "That's the only way to keep things moving."

These days, you're likely to find the Von Hoffmanns moving along a new course, inspired by the gorgeous weather. "We're golf nuts now," says Theo. "I just started four years ago. Todd would always take me to the putting greens and I was kind of kicking his butt."

Through their quests to improve the environment, and to learn the history of Venice, Todd and Theo say they've made some wonderful friends. "We get together with so many great people for events here," Todd says. "People we know are making music and art and there are writers here. It's like Greenwich Village, man. It's all income levels, all ethnicities, all religious types. It really is kind of a miracle, this little place."

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