

# Chef Michael Shafer is stirring up a recipe for Old Torrance Change is on the Menu

By Nick Green Staff Writer

One word best describes Michael Shafer of The Depot restaurant in Torrance, and perhaps the closest thing the South Bay has to a celebrity chef:

Big.

As in big, bold flavors that leap brashly from his generously proportioned dishes, with expense account prices to match.

As in 6 feet 4 inches big, with a bristly beard, long flaunt-it-if-you've-got-it ponytail and hefty bullet casing dangling around his neck that he bought from a jewelry outlet called Bullets 4 Peace.

As in bombastic, outsized personality big with matching tastes in music — Pink Floyd's sonic masterpiece "Dark Side of the Moon" changed his life, he claims — and eye-catching motor vehicles.

After all, few people can choose among five dashing vehicles to tool around town in, including a Harley-Davidson motorcycle, a rare 1956 Chevrolet Cameo pickup (only 1,452 made, said Shafer), a 1975 firetruck and a 1980 black Cadillac once owned by Liberace.

"He's larger than life in numerous ways," said Merrill Shindler, editor of the Los Angeles Zagat Survey and food critic for the Daily Breeze. "Who else would compare in the South Bay? Who else is a named chef like that? He's truly a kid in a candy store. It makes going to the restaurant a lot of fun."

These days that's plural, as in restaurants.

In February, at the height of the spending downturn, Shafer took a bold gamble and spent hundreds of thousands of dollars opening what amounts to a gourmet hamburger joint in a space on Cabrillo Avenue across from The Depot.

He painted the building fiery red (much to the consternation of some city officials), added whimsical fire department-related decor and named it BFD after the Buffalo Fire Department, the city he grew up in New York.

Shafer's role in Old Torrance is as big as the man himself.

Need to generate foot traffic on weekends when the neighborhood



Brad Graverson Staff Photographer

Chef Michael Shafer is Torrance's celebrity big fish restaurateur. He owns the The Depot and BFD (short for Buffalo Fire Department) establishments in Old Torrance.

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— Chef Michael Shafer, of The Depot and BFD in Old Torrance

## CHEF

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rolls up the sidewalk early?

How about a Saturday night concert series Shafer started last summer featuring local rock bands on the blocked off street outside BFD.

Want to promote local artists and draw those burger-buying crowds at the same time?

How about an evening Art-walk on previously barren sidewalks that Shafer just initiated from 5 to 7 p.m. every Tuesday.

Seeking to capitalize on time-honored festivals to move pints of pumpkin ale?

How about starting something he's dubbed The Almost Great Pumpkin Street Fair, scheduled for 5 to 8 p.m. Thursday at El Prado and Sartori avenues complete with arts, crafts, games and entertainment.

"It's not like it's an intolerable neighborhood," he said of struggling Old Torrance. "We're not in the middle of a desolate neighborhood. Now we just need to get people down here to open businesses."

Having practiced what he has preached, Shafer is doing his best to spread the retail gospel in Old Torrance.

Gary Zimmerman and two partners plan to open a badly needed coffee shop called Old Town Torrance Coffee & Tea in a vacant storefront on Marcelina Avenue opposite his World War II surplus store in

the next couple of months.

Shafer volunteered to provide consulting advice gratis to help get off the ground what's envisioned to be a Bohemian community gathering spot with poetry readings, acoustic guitar performances and sidewalk tables.

"Chef Shafer wants this to be a place where people come and it's just bustling," said Julia McHenry, one of Zimmerman's partners in the venture. "He'd like to see 20 restaurants and coffee shops down here and so would we."

Shafer isn't driven by altruism.

He understands that restaurants literally feed off each other as they feed customers, a tactic that has helped revitalize historic, but decaying downtowns in Southern California from Ventura to Culver City.

City officials had been trying to figure how to encourage just that sort of economic development in the long-neglected downtown when Shafer jumped into the fray.

"That's been dormant for a while," said Ted Semaan, a division manager in the Community Development Department who heads Torrance's Redevelopment Agency efforts in Old Torrance.

Old Torrance has a long way to go.

But Shafer is emerging as the risk-taking champion the area has long needed, an energetic catalyst who can rally others by sheer force of personality.

"They're so scared to take a chance," he said. "But that's what business is — it's a roll of the dice.

"I don't take no for an answer — I can't," Shafer added. "I see the potential."

Seeing potential where others cannot has become a Shafer hallmark. That's no accident. He credits two high school teachers who took him under their wing with helping unleash the potential in him as he flirted with juvenile delinquency.

"I think I developed the outgoing (personality) as a way to survive in Buffalo," he said. "I was a bit of a lost soul until my junior year in high school."

That's understandable given his upbringing.

Shafer and four sisters were raised alone by his fiercely independent mother, the manager of a deli at a local supermarket, after his father walked out on the family when he was 3.

His culinary interest surfaced early.

When he was 6, he would stand on a chair at the oven, pouring the assorted contents of kitchen cupboards into a pan to create what was dubbed "Michael's goulash."

By age 8, he was making cheesecakes from scratch.

"I've always cooked," said the former latchkey kid. "If you wanted to eat you learned to cook."

By 15, he was working in the kitchen of a greasy spoon; he was still in school when he started managing the kitchen

at a private men's club.

But Shafer had rock 'n' roll pretensions.

So at 21 he dropped out of Buffalo State College, with designs of becoming the next great rock photographer (after shooting concerts for the local newspaper) and moved to Southern California.

L.A. yawned.

Waiting for his career to take off, Shafer took a job in the kitchen of the Century Plaza Hotel, where he attracted the "ire and attention" of the late Walter Roth, corporate chief of Westin Hotels.

Instilled with discipline by the demanding Roth, Shafer completed a three-year apprenticeship and his culinary career was off and running.

That included an unlikely stint at a Caribbean bar and restaurant in Vienna called Boonoonoonos that was a hangout for United Nations staffers.

At 26, Shafer cooked burritos and chili fries for a hotel in Oslo, Norway.

A year later, he returned to the United States and rose to become executive sous chef at an L.A. hotel with 80 chefs working under him.

By chance, he sat next to restaurateur Robert Bell of Chez Melange fame at a chef's dinner. Bell helped him open The Depot in Old Torrance in October 1991.

For the first year Shafer stationed an armed guard outside the restaurant around the

clock to ensure someone was always keeping an eye on the place.

"I did see the potential because on Day One when we opened we were packed," Shafer said. "There was nothing else around here."

Shafer and Bell amicably dissolved their partnership in 1999. But like his former partner he, too, has spawned several South Bay restaurants, former employees going on to open the likes of Restaurant Christine in Torrance and Gina Lee's Bistro in the Torrance section of the Riviera Village.

"He's definitely demanding," said Scott Lee, co-owner of Gina Lee's, who met his wife and partner while working at The Depot.

"He's a strong-willed guy," Lee added. "But he's always been an upfront character. ... He loves being out and in front of people."

That includes Shafer's commitment to several nonprofit groups that benefit from his largesse.

Those include the Torrance Education Foundation, Torrance-based Scott Newman Center — founded by actor Paul Newman after his son died of a drug overdose — and his famous annual Halloween Ball, which he has put on for the last 14 years for the Pediatric Therapy Network.

The ball, scheduled for Sunday on Cabrillo Avenue in front of The Depot, is the group's biggest annual fundraiser. The

event grosses about \$200,000 for PTN, which provides speech, occupational and physical therapy to more than 1,200 children annually, said Debbie DiBiase, chief development officer.

"There's no Halloween Ball without Chef Shafer — it just wouldn't exist," she said. "It's his party."

Shafer hires the band, arranges donations for a live auction where he acts as auctioneer, sets up the tent, plans the decor and, in between, cooks the food.

"We've started calling him St. Chef because he does so much for the community," said Terri Nishimura, director of policy and community affairs for PTN. "He's really considered a guardian angel for Pediatric Therapy Network."

Shafer, 51, lives with his wife, Nancy, and their three sons, in Rolling Hills Estates, where he is an avid golfer at the Rolling Hills Country Club and tries to adhere to his personal motto — "Live well, love much, laugh often."

He revels in being a big fish in a small South Bay pond, but insists the area is plenty big enough for him.

"I just found a real home in the South Bay," he said. "It's a great little-big town. ... Torrance is not a sleepy little town anymore. It's definitely on the map."