



The Monarch, a CP Restaurant Group culinary gem

From the Ground Up

CRAIG AND SAMANTHA CORDTS-PEARCE HAVE HAND-BUILT A RESTAURANT EMPIRE THAT REMAINS LOCALLY GROWN.

BY TESS WEAVER

If you've dined at The Wild Fig, CP Burger, The Monarch, Woody Creek Tavern or Steak House No. 316 in Aspen or Boulder, you've experienced the proven formula that Craig and Samantha Cordts-Pearce and CP Restaurant Group created in Aspen. With Craig finding new spaces, dreaming up timeless concepts, and Samantha executing them, this DIY duo is not stopping. What's up next? The reopening of The Wild Fig (steps away from its original, 20-year location) and the opening of its sister restaurant in Willits.

What personality traits help you in this industry?

Samantha: Craig is a yes person—his cup is always three-quarters full. Nothing is ever out of his reach. He's a very positive, high-energy human being.

Craig: I'm a problem solver. The faster I can solve a problem, the quicker I can return to helping my customers. When I'm creating and designing, it's not really work. When I see a for-sale or for-lease sign, I'm like a dog drooling, asking how much the square footage is. I will never retire. I want to keep finding spaces and doing what I love.

“Treat everyone with respect, from the dishwasher to the manager—nobody is more important than anyone else.”

—SAMANTHA CORDTS-PEARCE

Samantha: I'm more left-brained. I have a German father [who was a waiter in New York City while getting his business off the ground in New York City until Samantha was 10]—I'm organized, regimented and very hard working. I don't sit down from the minute I wake up until I go to bed. Craig and I have different roles but see eye-to-eye on almost everything.

Craig: I pity the fool who messes with my wife—good luck. She's amazingly firm and fair. In the world of emotions, she's so level-headed. She asks the right questions. I wouldn't be where I am without my wife.

PHOTO BY DEREK SIGALDO

What do you credit your success to?

Samantha: We've done every job in the front of the house, from bussing to managing, and we've earned the respect of our employees. We have amazing employee retention—the chef of The Wild Fig hits 20 years next month. We remain local but never stale—we're always reinvesting in ourselves... traveling, exploring the world, staying up to date on trends. If something isn't working, we change it. And, being here since the early 90's, it's a lot about knowing what the town needs, wants and where there's a hole.

What's your management style?

Samantha: Treat everyone with respect, from the dishwasher to the manager—nobody is more important than anyone else. Reinvest and continue educating your employees. Continue to push and never settle for mediocracy. I only hire people who are happy in their lives and passionate about something in the hospitality industry—wine, food, spirits, or just making other people happy.

Craig: Be on time, take it seriously and never turn your first customer away. If a customer walks in at 5:25, we invite them in, offer them a glass

of water and a glass of wine and take care of them like family.

How have your roles evolved?

Samantha: CP Restaurant Group employs more than 200 employees—we are one of the largest employers in Aspen. It's a big company to run. While we own a lot of restaurants and bounce from restaurant to restaurant, often popping into four a day, we now work on the business rather than in the business.

Do you have a design philosophy?

Samantha: We believe in building timeless concepts. If you walk into Steakhouse No. 316, it looks like

it's been there for 150 years, but we made it look like that in 2011. We really like timeless European-style restaurants that transport people.

What's one Aspen bar or restaurant you miss?

Samantha: One of the best in all of Aspen was the Smuggler Land Office, where Gucci is now. Upstairs was a beautiful fine-dining restaurant, and downstairs was the most iconic Aspen bar with a bison head on the wall and a pot belly stove. I bartended there for six years. It was where all the firefighters hung out. John Denver and Jack Nicolson used to come in. That's a place that's sorely missed by many people.

And many people miss the Red Onion... which you'll be reopening someday soon.

Craig: Yes. It's still in the hands of locals. We plan to maintain the integrity of the Red Onion and honor its legacy. When we took over Woody Creek Tavern, we only closed for 100 days. We put in new floors, new plumbing, and a kitchen, and when we opened it, locals wondered if we had changed anything. The Tavern is doing great. I'm hoping people trust us to do the same with the Onion. We'll make a few changes here and there, but really, we just want to save it for Aspen.

What are you excited about?

Samantha: The reopening of The Wild Fig in June. We lost the lease after 20 years and had to relocate. Our new location is on the corner by the fountains. It's our third time in that space since 2005, and we're bringing back the popcorn wagon to that space. You'll find the same Parisian bistro feel and the same menu but a more elevated feel on the inside.

Craig: We have received so many emails and calls. People are chomping at the bit for it to re-open and for the Willits location to open in the mid-valley. We didn't realize how many people love this little restaurant we opened 20 years ago.