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QUESTIONS BY LINDA BRANDT, ANSWERS BY **CASEY GONZMART**



STAFF PHOTO / ROD MILLINGTON

Fifth-generation Gonzmart family member Cassandra Gonzmart, left, with father, Casey Gonzmart, Lauren Schellman-Gonzmart and Andrea Gonzmart, in the first Columbia restaurant, in Tampa.

One big food-loving family

Six Columbia restaurants are testament to the passion of five generations of the Gonzmarts, a locally legendary food-loving family.

The Columbia restaurant on St. Armands Circle was opened by the second- and third-generation family members of the Hernandez Gonzmart family. Casimiro Hernandez Jr. (second generation) and Cesar Gonzmart (who married third-generation family member Adela Hernandez Gonzmart) opened this restaurant in 1959.

Casey Gonzmart, fourth generation, graduated from Tampa's **Jesuit High School**, and his formal education in hotel and restaurant administration continued at the Ecole Hoteliere in Lausanne, Switzerland, and at La Escuela Sicial de Hosteleria in Madrid, Spain. He apprenticed at the Ledoyen Restaurant in Paris, France, and the Inter-Continental Hotel in Geneva, Switzerland.

He lived and worked in Sarasota from 1971 to 1993, as the general manager of the Columbia on St. Armands Circle.

He was 11 years old at the time the restaurant on St. Armands opened, and is now the chairman of the board of the Columbia Restaurant Group, the first of which was opened in 1905 in Tampa by his great-grandfather, Casimiro Hernandez Sr. Cesar was his father, Casimiro Jr. his grandfather.

The answers below are his.

Q:What is your most vivid memory about the day (or week) you opened? What was that date?

A:It was in 1959, and I remember driving from Tampa to Sarasota on U.S. 41 with my dad and grandfather. There was an unpaved road filled in with shells behind the Columbia Restaurant on St. Armands Circle, and many empty lots to play ball in. When I walked inside the restaurant, the wonderful

aromas were like the Columbia in Tampa, and I felt at home here with the food and my dad and grandfather.

Q: Was there a menu item you expected would be your signature preparation? Is it still on your menu?

A: Yes, our chicken and yellow rice dish. My mom used to debone the chicken for me and cut it up into pieces. Chicken and yellow rice is still on the menu, but I cut it by myself now.

Q: Are any of the original employees still working with you? Who?

A: Many of our original employees or their descendants have gone on to very prosperous careers, and we applaud them for that. Rosa Guillen has been with us for 37 years, and she holds a special place in my heart for her dedication and loyalty to my family. Rosa was given an award for Guest Service Excellence on the Front Line, in May by the Sarasota Convention and Visitors Bureau.

Q: Who inspired you to go into the restaurant business and how did you decide on Sarasota?

A: After my dad and grandfather told me that they had signed a lease for \$1,000 a month ... I couldn't understand how anyone would spend that much money -- that is \$12,000 a year! Looking back at their foresight and courage to embark on a major expansion outside of Tampa into Sarasota, I was inspired.

Q: If you had it to do over, would you do anything differently?

A: We don't have only guests, we have friends. We don't work, we share passion. We never had a day that we didn't look forward to surpassing our shared expectations. Today we have our friends' children and grandchildren, the third generation in my lifetime coming back to enjoy the Columbia that their parents and grandparents have enjoyed for all these years.