It's no secret that for the last 76 years, when Berkeley residents crave freshly caught, exquisitely prepared seafood, the first stop on their list is Spenger's Fresh Fish Grotto.

Originally a fish market, Spenger's opened on Fourth Street in 1932. Family patriarch and German immigrant Johan Spenger began fishing in the San Francisco Bay in 1865. With his sons Frank and Paul, Johan developed a thriving fishing business at the end of the 19th Century, eventually commanding a fleet of six boats. Once the Spengers set up shop, the next step was to show their customers how to cook the fish. The in-store demonstrations became so popular, they decided to start a restaurant, which they built adjacent to their fish market.

Frank Sr. realized he could trade his bounty for unwanted ship parts. As a result, the walls of Spenger's were adorned with nautical memorabilia including teak paneling, compasses, ships bells, and diving suits. Spenger's also has an astounding antique gun collection displayed on its walls.

But Spenger's most unusual artifact is the 34.29 carat diamond that's displayed near the bar. Once owned by Hawaiian Queen Kapiolani, the gem was purchased by Frank Sr. at a San Francisco auction in the 1930s. Frank was known for carrying it around in his jacket pocket and tossing it on the bar to amuse customers.

It's these types of details that drew the attention of Hollywood's finest, who always stopped by Spenger's on the way through town. Famous patrons include Clark Gable, Carol Lombard, Joe DiMaggio, Bing Crosby, and Tom Hanks.

As Spenger's reputation continued to grow, so too did the restaurant. By the 1990s, the Spengers had added on a total of 10 dining rooms with a capacity for more than 800 guests, as well as two bars. It was a lot to handle for Millie Spenger, who by that time was running the restaurant, so she decided to hand over management duties to seafood restaurant company McCormick and Schmick's. Now Executive Chef Devon Boisen runs the daily activities of Spenger's and remains committed to the original mission of the Spenger family. If he doesn't, he knows he's got Millie — who still lives in an apartment above the restaurant — to answer to.

"My goal is to leave Spenger's alone, not mess with it too much, and celebrate the old glory of this place," Boisen says. But he does have ideas about how to connect with a new generation of Spenger's customers. Boisen enjoys throwing Spenger's Annual Seafood Festival (which just wrapped up last Sunday) and four-course Brew Masters Dinners. He also devotes his time to local organizations such as Culinary Kids and Cal Cooking Club.

It's all done with the intention to keep the Spenger's tradition of top-quality, fresh fish going for another 76 years. Explains Boisen: "Spenger's has always been a Berkeley tradition, and it always will be."

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