

TIKI

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TIKI CHEF



It's Time to Take a Vacation... From Cooking

Let's party with Kelley Hawks
and Tiki Go Go Catering

Story and Images
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Hawks's logo-emblazoned turquoise '66 Ford pickup.

It's late afternoon and I'm standing outside a non-descript bar on San Francisco's Pier 50. The place is deserted and the fog is just beginning to roll over the skyline. Oh so lonely. But, off in the distance, I see a '66 Ford pickup rumbling toward me. It's a turquoise number, with the name "Tiki Go Go" emblazoned on it. The back is loaded down with Tikis, thatching, flowers and Hawaiian ornamentation of all kind. It pulls up to the bar and out bounds Kelley Hawks, wearing a jaunty sailor's cap, accompanied by her husband, Tom, and a handful of enthusiastic assistants. They storm the bar and, within two hours, they've transformed an ordinary space into a sultry tropical speakeasy, with cuisine to match.

This is Tiki Go Go Catering – a company created in 1999 by Kelley, to satisfy her love of Tiki along with her love of feeding people. The event she's catering today is for a recently married couple who are throwing their "Hey, did you know we got married a few months ago?" party for all their friends. (Not to be confused with a wedding, which Kelley also can accommodate.) Do you fantasize about having a fairytale wedding? You know, one of those ethereal affairs where you and your beloved arrive in a carriage and scruffy doves are released while a harpist plays "Wind Beneath My Wings"? Yes? Then, for the love of Pele, put down this magazine and fetch Martha Stewart. (And don't invite me.) But, if you hire Kelley Hawks, you can probably bet that your carriage will be festooned with blazing Tiki torches, the doves will be wearing teensy hula skirts and the harpist will plunk out "Ke Kali Nei Au." With all that, how could you NOT live happily ever after?

Kelley's life started happily enough, in Sarasota, Florida. Kelley's mother had lived in Oahu during the 1960's and infused her love of that life into their Florida home. Kelley recalls how her mother insisted they eat dinner outside every night by candlelight, and that their yard had all kinds of tropical plants growing in it. "My mom totally brought the island lifestyle in our lives." Turns out mom was a great party-thrasher, too. The seeds were sown early.

Kelley became involved with all the different aspects of the food world. She had relatives in the restaurant business and was surrounded by quality cuisine her whole life. When the other kids were gnawing their mystery meat sandwiches, Kelley's sack lunch usually contained high-end restaurant leftovers. As an adult, she learned the food business by working for various specialty food companies, meeting the produce growers and attending farmer's markets.



Kelley loves taking old recipes and converting them into something new with a tropical twist.

Eventually, Kelley found herself being asked to help cater parties. Around that time, a new craze started for personal chef services. Seizing the opportunity, she went through the personal chef-training course, so that her standards would be impeccable, with a certificate to back it up. On graduation day, everyone was asked to describe his or her future chef plans. When Kelley announced her Tiki-style catering dream, she faced a class full of confused looks. "They completely didn't get it", she says. Cut to 2005, Tiki Go Go makes the San Francisco Chronicle's list of best caterers in the city. I'm betting some of Kelley's former classmates are pretty envious now.

San Francisco is an epicurean's dream and the Bay Area has no shortage of talented chefs. Through word of mouth (not to mention her very recognizable turquoise truck) Kelley has managed to acquire a large clientele, both corporate and private, who appreciate her unique island touch to food and event planning. She caters for big companies such as The Gap and Dolby Studios, as well as cooking for families in their own home. She creates individualized weekly menus for her home clients, putting together enough meals to last them all week, and sealing them in easy-to-reheat, recyclable glass containers. "Instead of people having to go buy a whole bunch of groceries, plan a bunch of meals and ending up throwing out half the food because they don't have time to cook it, they'll instead get me doing all that for them while making it nutritional, and supporting the local growers". Kelley avoids waste as much as possible, too. All the leftover food from her jobs is distributed to their friends and neighbors, as well as local homeless people.

Kelley loves taking old recipes and converting them into something new with a tropical twist. I ask Kelley for a simple example of how any-



one can Tiki-up their cooking. "When you have a nice piece of fish, like Tilapia, you can whip a little fresh orange juice with grape seed oil and dip the fish in that, that coat it with some Panko crumbs or crushed macadamia nuts, and then top it with some chopped mango and bake it. So good and super healthy!" (Hey, no one said "Hawaiian food" meant you had to go all-Spam.)

The Hawks live in one of San Francisco's reclaimed warehouse spaces – a true urban setting filled with their vast Hawaiiana collection, which they use to decorate their events. What this means is that every Tiki collectible they buy is a tax deduction. (You heard right... and I can feel you seething with jealousy.) Kelley and Tom have been collecting Tiki paraphernalia since their Hawaiian elopement, fourteen years ago. A favorite pastime is to scour yard sales and swap meets for unwanted tropical souvenirs; monkey pod serving bowls, Coco Joe's figurines, nautical what-nots... all of these are put into action at their catered events.

Today, I am witness to this as I watch them leave no boring wall uncovered, no serving platter ungarnished. An artist friend of the Hawks has lent them a dozen of his one-of-a-kind sculptural vases, which are filled with stunning tropicals. A plain cement wall is covered with lauhala matting and strung with silk flower garlands and twinkle lights. Every table has a vintage Tiki as a centerpiece, bringing its own personality to it. Kelley is staring at a large, cumbersome support beam that is smack-dab in the center of this room. It's really ugly... for approximately ten minutes, that is. Kelley digs into her boxes of "set dressing" and pulls out a collection of tropical fabrics and various Tiki masks. She wraps the architectural faux pas in the fabrics and ties them with nautical rope. She tacks up the masks on top of this. I don't see an ugly structural beam anymore. I see a conversation piece. "I tend to go overboard with every little detail", says Kelley, "because I want it gorgeous and done in a great way. When someone hires me to do a party I go crazy. I start dreaming right then. I'm thinking, 'Oh my god, I'm getting PAID to create my fantasy Tiki party?'"

When Kelley needs foliage for décor, she seeks out local tree trimmers and gathers up the branches for free. Banana leaves (used for food display) can be found at Hispanic markets. Tropical flowers are more reasonably priced if you go to the wholesale flower mart, instead of a traditional florist. Tom likes to collect inexpensive vintage Hawaiian records and use them as additional decoration pieces. These are just a few tricks that any one of us can do when planning our next party. The main thing is to use your imagination, add rum, and you're good to go.

One of Kelley's particularly memorable catering events was held in a corporate office building. Kelley and company hired a hula dancer who went aisle to aisle, beckoning everyone out of their beige cubbyholes. The bewildered employees followed the exotic dancing maiden into the main boardroom, where Kelley and company had set up a screen and were projecting vintage surf films. Exotic food was set up all over. They even had a sushi maker stationed inside a bamboo hut. They were able to transform an ordinary, bland space into something fantastical, and, by doing so, probably made a permanent impact on

some of these poor corporate souls, yearning for a little exotic escape.

But even people who spend their days in a Tiki food-fantasy need to escape, too. Weekdays, Kelley and Tom are up by six a.m. and spend the next eight hours customizing and cooking their client's weekly menus. Weekends are often booked with private parties. So, four days a week, the couple end their workday at the beach in Pacifica. (Just outside San Francisco.) They bring along all the leftovers from that day's cooking and feed their friends who meet them there. "It's so awesome! It's like a mini-luau every night!" says Kelley. Tom is a gifted skateboarder, and Pacifica beach has a great skate park. While Tom skates with his friends, Kelley puts together upcoming menus for their clients, although she also does double-duty by videotaping all the skateboarders to help them improve their style. When Tom and Kelley have a little extra free time, they like to take road trips to seek out new skate parks and Tiki bars.

But now, the sun is setting over San Francisco Bay. The newlyweds and their guests have arrived and are taking in the scene that Kelley and her crew has created. Welcoming everyone at the doorway is a large hand-carved Tiki with Tom's father's 1952 surfboard leaning against it. The room is lit by candlelight. The D.J. is playing surf tunes and trays of orchid-trimmed appetizers are on every surface. Everyone who enters has been instantly transported to someplace warm, languid and far, far away. Wish you were here. Oh wait, you can be. Just call Kelley.

Kari Hendler is a television script supervisor, writer and photographer who loves any excuse to eat and party. Hungry for more?

Visit www.Tikigogo.com AND check out Kelley's exclusive recipes on Tiki Magazine's website.



Kelley Hawks' Tiki Go Go began in 1999 out of a love for Tiki and feeding people.



Hawks utilizes wooden Tiki statues of all shapes and sizes, fresh tropical flowers and natural materials such as bamboo in her décor.

