

Finding Herself in Aruba
Building a Caribbean Network
By Tim Cotroneo

When Tina Causey-Bislick moved to Aruba in 1999, she never dreamed she'd be a restaurant owner. Then again, Tina never thought she'd also start up a prominent Aruba magazine, launch a public relations firm, and become the top-ranked female beach tennis player on the island.



Tina Causey-Bislick taking a rare break at the Hollywood Smokehouse Diner in Aruba

To say the 45-year-old Causey-Bislick is a multi-tasker is an understatement. Today, the North Carolina-transplant juggles three businesses and maintains her lofty beach tennis perch in a sunrise to sunset calendar that still leaves time for family.

Tina's journey to Aruba and entrepreneurial success began with a start rarely endorsed by any business "how to" publications. "Before coming here to Aruba, I was a single-Mom working my way through college as an event caterer in Greensboro, NC. I remember that period of my life as being pretty hard," Causey-Bislick recalled.

Romantic Beginnings

Romance was the motivator behind Tina's initial trips to Aruba. Treks to this Caribbean island drenched in Dutch ancestry were a way to spend time with her boyfriend who was working at the Radisson hotel as an executive chef. "I would visit two to three times per year and eventually landed a job as a writer for *Aruba Today*, the island's English-speaking newspaper," Causey-Bislick said.

Much to the chagrin of family and friends back in Greensboro, Tina sold everything she owned and moved to Aruba for keeps in 1999. Causey-Bislick began making connections in the Aruba tourism industry, and her business network started to flourish.



Tina flanked by son Taylor and husband Mike.

Sporting an Island Network

Since the very beginning, Causey-Bislick has found Aruba to be an encouraging environment, especially from a business standpoint. She began generating business startups through the sheer will of her personality and burgeoning public relations talent. Causey-Bislick credits networking as one of the main reasons she was able to thrive in Aruba, rather than heading back home like many best-intentioned expats.

“During my first couple of years here, I became very involved in some of the activities the island has to offer. I started windsurfing, scuba diving, and playing beach tennis. I developed a circle of friends from each of these activities. These people not only became great friends, they also expanded my business circle,” Causey-Bislick said.

While working for the *Aruba Today* newspaper, Tina became acquainted with Ann Brown, the Managing Director of Tierra Del Sol, one of Aruba’s most exclusive real estate developments and golf courses. Brown not only became Tina first public relations client, she also encouraged Causey-Bislick to become the creative inspiration for a new Aruba magazine.



In addition to her restaurant, Tina also runs a magazine and PR business.

Three Times a Business

In 2001, *Island Temptations* magazine was born. The glossy publication featuring fashion, music, dining and art, has grown into Aruba’s most highly distributed magazine. Whereas Causey-Bislick enjoys watching her family restaurant grow in popularity, *Island Temptations* has been an opportunity for Tina to tap her creative juices. “Each edition has its own personality. I love the anticipation of seeing how each new issue evolves into print. The whole process of interviewing for features, doing photo shoots, and working with the layout is very satisfying,” Causey-Bislick said.

Tina's ability to network has also resulted in a healthy client list for Oasis Creative Group, her public relations business. The Westin Hotel, Aruba Tourism & Convention Bureau, and a half dozen of the island's top restaurants all utilize Tina's flair for promotion. Through her PR firm, Causey-Bislick is able to keep in touch with what's happening in two of Aruba's greatest resources, the tourism and hospitality industries.

Causey-Bislick's penchant for trying new things not only re-ignited a spark in her social life, it also played a role in Tina becoming a restaurant owner. The romantic interest that first drew Tina to Aruba ended after a 14-year run. In 2009, Tina told a friend she'd like to take a ride on a Harley Davidson. A friend suggested that Mike Bislick, a native of Aruba, be Tina's Harley chauffeur.



The Westin Aruba Resort is one of Tina's PR clients

Carolina-style Cooking in Aruba

Something clicked on that first ride and in April of 2011, the couple wed at the oceanfront home of a friend Tina met through her public relations business. Shortly thereafter, The Hollywood Smokehouse Diner, featuring southern-style barbecue, opened for business. The restaurant is housed in a building Mike's grandfather has owned since 1941 and is located in the rustic Aruba city of San Nicolas.

Tina and Mike thought great southern barbecue would be a natural for the 200-plus Texas and Oklahoma natives working a block away at Aruba's Valero Refinery. Tina developed a low and slow recipe for barbecue that instantly drew a following.

The restaurant has not only been embraced by the nearby refinery clientele, but tourists vacationing 30-minutes away in Aruba's capital city of Oranjestad also flock to the restaurant seeking an authentic barbecue experience. The old saying, "If the food is good, customers will find you," has translated into the Hollywood Smokehouse garnering a TripAdvisor number-two ranking out of 180 restaurants in Aruba.

Tennis Queen

Life isn't all work and no play for Causey-Bislick. She somehow finds a way to squeeze competitive beach tennis into her non-stop schedule. The sport,

originating in Italy 30 years ago, is the perfect activity for Aruba's white sand beaches. Like her business ventures, Tina takes the sport featuring a tennis net, racquetball-type rackets, and beach sand floor very seriously.

"Here in Aruba the number one ranked male player is called the Beach Tennis King. In 2010, I became the number one female player or the Beach Tennis Queen," Causey-Bislick said. Tina has taken her game internationally while playing in Florida, New York, Reunion, and Bermuda.



When she's not working, Tina has a passion for beach tennis.

Amazing Pace

A typical day for Tina starts the night before. The process of cooking the Hollywood Smokehouse ribs begins in the evening after the last customer has gone home. *Low and slow* is how ribs are cooked in North Carolina and now very successfully in Aruba.

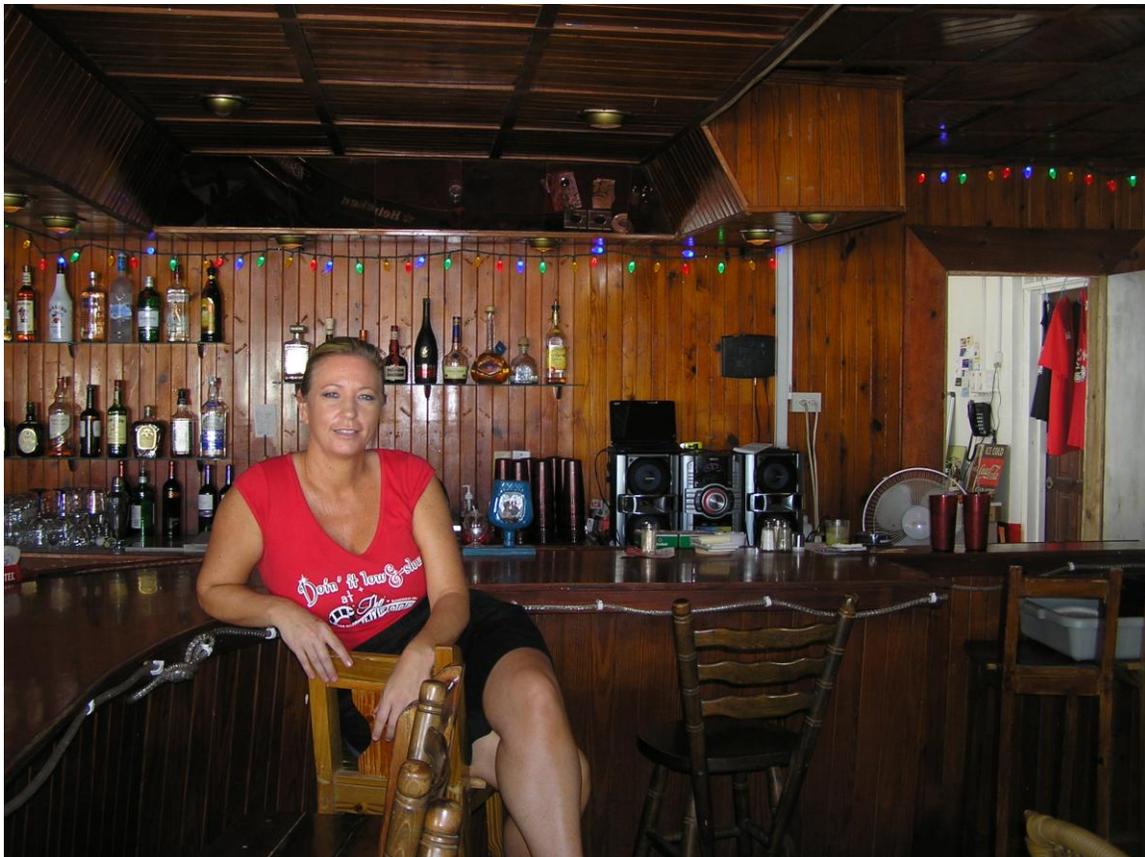
Tina shared with a visitor how "today" was going. "I started my morning by sending out press releases. Then the Westin Aruba called to let me know they were planning a big wedding event and they needed photographers. After sorting that out, I participated in a 30-minute conference call with a PR client. Next, I worked in the restaurant kitchen in the early afternoon. After meeting with a journalist, I'm planning on driving to Moomba Beach to work with my beach tennis trainer. At 7:30 this evening I'm attending the Grand Opening of a new restaurant. By the way, *Island Temptations* magazine completed publishing a

new coffee-table book covering 50 years of Aruba tourism today,” Causey-Bislick said calmly.

Sharing, Survivor, and a Surprise

Looking back, did Tina ever envision the kind of fulfillment she’s enjoyed in Aruba? “I came here because of a guy, but deep down I think there was something else that drew me here,” Causey-Bislick reflected.

An unconventional approach to business, as well as life, has resulted in Tina’s trans-continental path to success. “I’ve never been one to follow the rules. I’ve often wondered why I always needed to find a more difficult or tougher path. I guess it’s okay not to do what everyone else does or follow a normal route,” Causey-Bislick said.



Tina brought a North Carolina low and slow BBQ recipe to Aruba

Family can sometimes suffer in the wake of an entrepreneur who is driven. Years after charting her course in Aruba, Tina has managed to win over family members by sharing in her success.

“Both my daughter and my son are involved in my businesses. My daughter Brianna has written articles for *Island Temptations*, and she also works at the Hollywood Smokehouse when she’s on the island. My son, Taylor, has worked at

the restaurant since we opened. He's also writing his college thesis on how we're marketing the restaurant. It's rewarding to have your kids working with you and watch them grow as adults," Causey-Bislick said.

Tina received a surprise letter a few years back reinforcing that she must have done something right in her life's work. "I've always admired my older sister Anita. She's such a good person and has lived the kind of life you hoped for growing up. A lot of times, when I was at a crossroads in my life, I would say to myself, "What would Anita do?" Causey-Bislick said.

"Five years ago I was one of the semi-finalists for the television show *Survivor*. At the last moment I was told I wasn't going to be on the show. I was pretty disappointed. Shortly after that, I received a letter from Anita that really caught me off guard. She wrote about admiring how I would try things, fall down, and get back up. She finished the letter by saying she looked up to me. I never knew that," Causey-Bislick said while shaking her head.

Secret Recipe

Success in business, or success in life, doesn't always go to the fastest. Sometimes it's the tortoise that crosses the finish line well ahead of the hare. Like the best barbecue in Aruba, Tina Causey-Bislick will tell you that what's often savored most is what happens low and slow.

Tim Cotroneo is a Lino Lakes, MN- based freelance writer specializing in Caribbean travel and business.