

MARYANN FERENC



Profile for Tampa Bay Metro Magazine: Maryann Ferenc surveys the surrounding scene with great satisfaction. The respected restaurateur and formidable community activist is gazing through the clear glass walls of Sono Café and watching an impromptu Sunday afternoon crowd enjoy the city's newly refurbished waterfront. Encouraged by how readily the public has embraced Curtis Hixon Park, Ferenc readily admits there is still work to be done to continue creating interest and keep crowds coming. "People are our greatest asset but there has to be action to keep them engaged and keep the momentum going," Ferenc observed. "Now that the museum is finished and the park is open we have to bring this project to its full capacity so that it continues to succeed."

Working alongside staff at the café, Ferenc has her hair neatly tucked beneath a Sono-logoed baseball cap. What most people reading the newspaper and savoring the café's slow food movement-inspired cuisine may not realize is that the cap is just

one of many hats this formidable businesswoman has worn throughout the years. Her most recognizable role may be as the founder and CEO of the celebrated fine dining restaurant *Mise en Place* and its equally successful catering division. Hard to believe this energetic entrepreneur, who now oversees the café located in the lobby of the Tampa Museum of Art, has been at the forefront of Tampa Bay's dining scene for nearly 25 years. But Ferenc's passions have placed her at the forefront of the re-organization of the local food bank that supplies non-profit agencies with food for those in need. She's championed small businesses through her leadership of the Tampa Independent Business Alliance. She even orchestrated a high profile local political campaign that seemed headed for success until a last-minute entry by the eventual winner.

When asked about her own aspirations for public office Ferenc acknowledges that option may be in her future but only if the right opportunity comes along. "I love this city and I love the notion of helping it to solve its problems. But I am not good at not making progress. I would have to feel like I could actually get something done," Ferenc said. One testament to her leadership skills recently landed her a much coveted appointment to the U.S. Travel and Tourism Advisory Board that assists the U.S. Department of Commerce on matters relating to the travel and tourism industry. As the current board chair for Tampa Bay & Co., the countywide agency promoting this area as a travel destination and host site for major events like Super Bowls and the Republican National Convention, Ferenc is a tireless booster for an industry that has recently been battered by a weak economy and weather extremes make travel difficult, if not impossible.

Growing up in Detroit, Mich. where her parents ran a restaurant, Ferenc learned valuable lessons about customer service, running a business and paying attention to detail that she relies on daily. "My core business is still about serving people food and drink. If I can't do that well, I can't do anything else," she insists. When pressed about her achievements, Ferenc quickly points to the positive influences that have been hallmarks of her career – family, co-workers and the people who support making this city great. "A restaurant is a meeting place. Everybody walks through its door," she said. "That gives me the opportunity to see so much through other people's eyes. When they are here, they talk to each other and to me. That helps me understand what people care about. "But what I am most excited about are the young professionals who are taking an active interest in the future of this city.

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They aren't in it for their own egos or gains. They are interested and invested in what they are doing. I think their motive is just to make this a better environment to live in."