

Atenas Today Interviews Kay and Tom Costello
of Kay's Gringo Postres

AT: This place is bigger than I expected. You are a bakery, a restaurant, and an English language library. There must be over 500 books on these shelves. Do you sell them?

Kay: No, it's free. We encourage people to donate and swap books.

AT: That's a great service. Together with the food, that must bring in a lot of people.

Kay: It's great. We get to meet people from all over.

AT: Is that why you started this business?

Kay: Pretty much. I love people and have always done things that led me in this direction. Back "home" I was a waitress for 33 years. Now "home" is here and I love it.

AT: Where did you and Tom come from?

Kay: We are both from South Dakota. My first husband died, and five years ago I married Tom, who brought me here.

AT: What about you, Tom? What did you do in South Dakota?

Tom: I was a cattle rancher until the late 70's. My grandparents came to South Dakota during the gold rush and my family had been there ever since. I grew up a cowboy. Later on I started a bar and steak house.

AT: What was your life like?

Tom: For many years I had a serious drinking problem. Finally when I was 43 I got into AA. That was 34 years ago. After I sold my steak house, I spent six years working at the treatment center that helped me, and after that I did counseling

AT: AA has certainly helped a lot of people. I see signs for meetings all around Costa Rica.

Tom: Yes, but not many meetings for English-speakers. That's why I host an AA meeting in English here at 7 pm every Wednesday evening. .

AT: How did you get from South Dakota to Costa Rica?

Tom: I had a friend in South Dakota who had grown up in Costa Rica. In 1995 he organized a trip for a bunch of us to visit his relatives and tour the country. Costa Rica felt like home to me, like South Dakota used to be, open and friendly with not too many rules and restrictions. I knew then that I would be moving here, and in 2003 I did.

AT: You've only been married five years, so you must have come shortly after you got together. How did you drag Kay away from all her friends in South Dakota?

Kay: He brought me here on a vacation. It was my birthday. After being in Atenas only a few days people we had met gave me a birthday party. Forty people came. I couldn't believe it. When it was time to leave, I cried. I was still crying when we got to Florida, and we decided to get right back on the plane and return to Costa Rica. We stayed for 4 months. From then on it was a matter of settling things in South Dakota and moving.

AT: How did you originally meet Tom?

Kay: (Laughing) I fell into an oil pit.

AT: That's kind of drastic.

Kay: It's one of life's stories where one thing leads to another. I was having the oil changed in a small car. The car was over the pit, but the car did not cover the entire hole. When I walked around the front of the car, I assumed that the floor continued. Wrong.

AT: Were you badly hurt?

Kay: Pretty bad. It was a six foot drop onto a metal grate. I had broken bones and deep punctures.

AT: And Tom was there to pull you out?

Kay: Oh no. I met Tom later when I was using the insurance money to buy a trailer from him. The owner of the gas station told me that I had to sue him or his insurance company would not pay my medical bills. I protested and said it was an accident, but he insisted. So I sued and my lawyer got me enough money to buy a new trailer. Go figure.

AT: Don't get me started on the American legal system.

Kay: Anyway, after my first meeting with Tom I told my friend that I was going to marry him.

Tom: Yea, I took her dinner to celebrate her buying my trailer and that was it. We were married a year later.

Kay: Just think, if I hadn't fallen into that pit, I would never have met Tom and never discovered Costa Rica.

AT: Did you intend to start a business when you moved to Costa Rica?

Tom: Not really, but I have always been open to trying things.

AT: How did you get into gringo deserts?

Kay: It was a strange thing. Tom found this old recipe for cheesecake and talked me into trying it. The result was surprisingly good, and people urged us to sell it. This desert led to others that people seemed to like. One of our early customers was the La Trilla Restaurant.

Tom: In order to sell to restaurants we were told we needed to get a business license, and to get a license we had to have a location. This store space was available, and here we are.

AT: You seem to be selling a lot more than just deserts.

Kay: Oh yes, we have evolved into a restaurant. We serve gringo style breakfasts and lunches from 7 am to 6 pm Monday through Friday, and 8 am to 4 pm on Saturday. On Sunday we are open 1 pm to 6 pm and Tom serves a full course dinner.

AT: That's a heavy schedule.

Kay: We have great local help. You met Mercedes, who has been with me since the beginning and speaks near perfect English with our gringo customers. Tom does the main dish cooking, and Mercedes, Irene, and I do the baking. It's our life, and we love it.

AT: Do you have children in the U.S.

Tom: I have 3 and Kay has 4. But they have to come here to see us. I haven't been back since we moved here four years ago, and I don't intend to go. We have two great grandchildren we haven't even seen yet.

AT: What is that you like so much about your life here?

Kay: Aside from all the things we all like about Costa Rica, we love our role in the community here. We have become a kind of community center for English speakers, and we have the opportunity to meet and help new people. Some customers came in last week who did not speak Spanish and who had to meet with local officials. We sent Mercedes to go with them to the meeting. It's very satisfying.

Tom: Don't forget the food. We see ourselves as filling a hole in providing gringos the type of food that is hard to get in Atenas.

AT: Are most of your customers gringos?

Tom: Surprisingly, we think about 60% of our customers are Ticos, and more could be. One Tico came in recently and asked if we sold only to gringos. He ended up enjoying a burger and fries.

AT: So your business venture has been a success?

Tom: By our definition, yes. It continues to grow and the income allows us to hire the help we need to let us work reasonable hours and do what we want.

AT: What are your future plans for your business?

Kay: We keep adding things as people request them. Full scale dinners every night would be hard, but Sunday brunch is a possibility. We are considering having movie and/or bingo nights.

Tom: I was a real estate broker in the U.S. for twenty years, and I am doing a little of that on the side. It is fun to show people properties in paradise.

AT: Where do you live?

Tom: We rent in downtown Atenas. At our age, we do not want to have to drive at night. For a while we rented in Barrio Mercedes, but there were too many babies in strollers on the road for me to be comfortable driving at night.

AT: Are you thinking of buying some property to get in on the real estate boom?

Tom: I believe that in the short term renting is much more economical than buying, and at our age we can't count on the long term. In the meantime, Pura Vida.