

Susan, Charles and Citron: A Love Story



At first, you think that your general sense of relaxation is due to the lake.

Because you can see the lake, even as you approach the restaurant from outside, as well as from every table in the place. You anticipate seeing the lake again as you are warmly welcomed in the most gracious way, by the most poised, polite staff ever, and you are then guided to your table. Once you sit down, you are instantly transported to a simpler time: your childhood summers spent at someone's fondly-called "lake house."

Whether seated inside or out on the terrace, you are at the *lake*, an enchanted place where even the simplest meals are magic, and where memories are made.

And yet, sitting down and talking with Susan and Charles Levine soon reveals that the elegant, seemingly effortless atmosphere of this area's quintessential fine dining experience has required many years of effort. And skill. And yes, I'll dare to say it: love.

Love of the restaurant business. Love of sophisticated, yet not fussy, food. Genuine love of service – the kind of service that almost doesn't exist anymore.

Love of their customers and an expertise that has been painstakingly developed over nearly 40 years while catering for some of the most demanding, exacting business and community leaders in Baltimore. Love and respect between two people who interact and who complement each other so



seamlessly, it's like they are two halves of the same being whose collective soul is poured into their life's work.

This is Citron.

"I'd be happy in a library 10 hours a day – I like people, too, but I'm a reader and a writer," says a beautiful, understated-yet-glamorous Susan Levine as she inquires where I would be most comfortable – "In the shade, or in the sun? Outside or inside? Are the umbrellas giving you enough shade?" It's as if she has already forgotten that our conversation is about her and Charles, and the business they have built that enchants so many.

Meanwhile, the light plays on the lake like a Monet painting.

"I was working as Vice President of Corporate Communications at Provident Bank, and there was a very fancy dinner taking place at the BMA. My CEO knew that I loved art, so he asked me if I would go in his place."



The 50-foot banquet table for the event was so lovely, draped in deep Pink Floyd roses, that Susan commented upon this to Charles, who happened to be standing next to her. Charles said, "You like the table? I made it."

As so often happens when relationships are "meant to be," from that point onward Charles and Susan kept running into each other at events that Charles catered. Finally, their mutual friend Martha Macks-Kahn, an artist, art dealer and Owner of Goya Contemporary and wife of renowned psychiatrist Dr. Peter Kahn, invited both Charles and Susan to a small dinner party at her home. When Susan reluctantly mentioned she was allergic to shellfish, Charles ensured that Susan was served poulet tournedos instead, and throughout the dinner he made sure that Susan was comfortable.

“It felt really good standing next to her,” Charles interrupts the conversation to say.

As one learns quickly from Charles, his ability to intuitively “feel” those around him is one of the keenest you will ever witness.

Indeed, when Charles talks about his nearly 40 years in catering, he talks about hard work, yes. Of course he does. Charles first cut his chops in fine dining in the Pimlico restaurant, a Baltimore Old World institution known for its fine food and fine service, where he ran their catering division – and it shows. A meal at Citron reminds us of that tradition of hospitality that only comes from having experienced first-hand how hospitality *used* to be, where the welcome was so warm that you left feeling like a movie star.

Yet, when talking about his background in catering, Charles talks about his *love* of the work. He talks about his desire to learn, and adapt, and to problem-solve, with each venue and each menu presenting challenges that he relished meeting, in a way that would surpass the expectations of customers for whom he had, and continues to have, unbridled respect.

Customers like:

Johns Hopkins University and Medicine.
The World Trade Center.
The Peabody Library.
The Statue of Liberty Rededication.
The Pope John Paul II Cultural Center.
The US Naval Academy.
The Baseball Hall of Fame Inauguration.
The National Aquarium.
5 U.S. Presidents.



With an equally abiding respect, Charles talks about the importance of staff members who have been with him; not for years, but for decades, and about his recognition that his staff members are an essential part of the perfection that he is always striving to achieve.

Together, Susan and Charles make Citron work. Charles brings together everything he learned about conjuring gorgeous spaces and managing highly trained, sophisticated staff teams to create incomparable dining experiences in a single, beautiful lakeside space, thus allowing his customers ample opportunity to celebrate fine dining, and each other's company, as an essential part of living their best lives. Ever-present, graceful, creative yet subtle, Susan captures and communicates Citron's key moments that might otherwise go unseen. Together, Charles and Susan are two parts of a very finely-tuned concert. Together for more than 22 years, with four children, they still finish each other's sentences, and gaze into each other's eyes. An hour in their company makes it clear that Citron is the fruit of labor, and yes... I'll say it again... of love.

As the sun sets over the water and streams across the now-golden terrace, one realizes that, for Charles and Susan Levine, Citron is not their "job." It is the realization of a dream. All of which makes the story of Charles and Susan Levine not a simple narrative about a restaurant, but a romantic tale of two people who genuinely cherish each other and their work, who appreciate and respect those who know them, and who, together, have created a community of people who deeply appreciate them and their consummate accomplishment: Citron.



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