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A legend in her own right - Ingrid Croce - Company Profile

[Nation's Business](#), [Dec, 1992](#) by [Sharon Nelton](#)

Ingrid Croce was once best known as the wife of folk singer and songwriter Jim Croce. Today, however, she has made a name for herself as one of San Diego's most visible - and most successful - entrepreneurs.

The creator of such hits as "Time In A Bottle," "Bad, Bad Leroy Brown," and "Operator," Jim Croce lost his life in a plane crash in 1973.

Jim and Ingrid Croce and their 2-year-old son, Adrian James ("A.J."), had moved to San Diego a month or so before Jim was killed. After his death, Ingrid, once an art student, and A.J. took refuge for several years in Costa Rica, where she studied that nation's culture and art. During that period, she also launched a series of court battles to obtain the royalties her husband was owed.

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"The reason for the litigation was that Jim had died penniless. He was making millions of dollars and never received the money that was due," says Ingrid Croce, 45. Her legal actions over a decade eventually produced royalties.

On her return to San Diego, she opened and ran a children's preschool. A singer and songwriter herself, she has performed often with Jim, and in 1982, she returned to the road. But her own singing career came to an end when she developed vocal-cord problems.

She invited a friend to her home one afternoon to help her think through what to pursue next. "The prerequisites were that I wanted to work in a [community] and provide a service to people, that I would love going to work every day, that it would be a hands-on situation," she says. It also had to be successful economically so it could sustain itself and enable her to grow, she says. "To me, unless you're growing, you're not successful."

They thought they had exhausted all the options when Croce offered her friend some homemade blintzes. "I used to always have my refrigerator and my freezer filled with food," says Croce, recalling that she made all kinds of blintzes and froze them "by the hundreds" for microwaving later.

After sampling Croce's creations, her friend said, "That's what you should do."

Within a few weeks, she opened Blinchiki International Inc., a small restaurant and catering business selling Russian and Italian specialties in the Hillcrest part of San Diego. ("Blinchiki," says Croce, is Russian for blintz and reflects her ancestry.)

However, she saw promise in a historical section known as the Gaslamp Quarter. Located within easy walking distance of San Diego's convention center, it was just beginning to be redeveloped. Croce opened Blinchiki International Restaurant there and, just a block away, in the dazzling downtown shopping mall called Horton Plaza, she opened Croce's Coffee House.

And she grew. Today, her restaurant and entertainment empire commands virtually an entire block of the Gaslamp Quarter. It includes Croce's Restaurant & Jazz Bar (featuring live jazz); Croce's Top Hat Bar & Grille (for live rhythm and blues); Croce's Catering; Ingrid's Cantina & Sidewalk Cafe; Upstairs, a coffee bar; and - still at Horton Plaza - Croce's Coffee House.

Croce employs 100 workers plus another 100 free-lance musicians. She won't reveal exact annual revenues but says they fall between \$3 million and \$4 million.

The empire's mystique is centered on the Jim Croce legend. Jim Croce pictures and memorabilia adorn Croce's Restaurant, for example. Tapes and compact disks of his music are available at all locations. Out this fall is a two-compact disk package marketing the 50th anniversary of Jim Croce's birth.

Good food and good music are the mainstays of the business - Croce's Restaurant offers a sophisticated menu of what she describes as "American International" cuisine, while Ingrid's Cantina is devoted to dishes of the American South-west. But Croce thinks it's the total "experience" that keeps people coming back to what she refers to collectively as "Croce's." She says that "it's not for people who need to be seen and who want to make the kinds of connections they'd get in a trendy, avant garde restaurant." Croce's is a place where you make

connections "for life."

She strives for excellence in all areas, she says, and approach requiring a staff "that is constantly fresh and happy." She tries to keep her people that way through thorough training (even the waiters have to know something about the music that's being played so they can answer customers' questions); fun (bowling for everyone on Sunday afternoons); and rewards (\$1,000 "scholarships" are offered annually for singular accomplishment).

Croce's has become a family business in a sense. Ingrid Croce married a local lawyer, Jim Rock, five years ago, and he is now with Croce's full time. Having honed his talents at Croce's, son A.J., 21, has embarked on his own career as a jazz singer, pianist, and songwriter.

Now and then, Croce reviews her original prerequisites to see if she's meeting them. And usually she is. She continues to providing a service. She continues to grow. She has created a community for herself. And in so doing, she's made herself a legend in San Diego just a Jim Croce did nationally in his own time.

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