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## Pink Door's "la padrona": I have MS, and life's still a cabaret

Nancy Leson

For the [Pink Door's](#) "la padrona" -- stage name Jacqueline di Roberto -- life is a cabaret: literally. At her [Post Alley trattoria](#), Jackie Roberts opens the pink door to anyone willing to step through it and buy into the magic. That magic, the one she's been selling for nearly 30 years, is food, drink and entertainment. The Pink Door's mood owns the spotlight here in Pike Place Market, taking its musical cue from the theater, cabaret culture, bawdy burlesque.

Why, yes, that is a trapeze artist swinging from the rafters while you eat your antipasti. And no, this is not [Teatro ZinZanni](#), but its lower-key forerunner: a ristorante e bar known for its flamboyant owner, its romantic rooftop overlooking Elliott Bay and its enormous entertainment value. Willkommen to the Pink Door, kept very much alive by a padrona whose taste for life is insatiable, though that life has taken a turn since she was diagnosed six months ago with [Multiple Sclerosis](#).



*The Pink Door's Jacqueline di Roberto says, "Life is a cabaret. Or a cabernet. Whichever comes first!" [photo of Jackie by Steve Smrstik]*

"I'm the original bon vivant about sensuality and living in the world of taste and smell," Jackie told me. And when she lost her sense of taste and smell two years ago, "It was a big change in who I am." Other symptoms followed, "but because MS is multi-factorial, there were symptoms I didn't know were MS." Initially, "I thought those symptoms, including insomnia, were just due to the lifestyle of a restaurant owner": too much good wine, not enough good sleep.

"Had I not been in love" (with her longtime friend and the Pink Door's head-chef of three years, Steve Smrstik) "I'd have been very depressed."

Fighting depression, and attempting to understand the changes her 50-something body was undergoing, "We were, 'What's this all about?' I went to, probably, 50 doctors," she recalls. Her sense of taste and smell has waxed and waned over the last two years, and came back before her diagnosis, she said. Yet other symptoms continued.

"The thing that put me over the top was a tooth surgery after my last trip to Italy." Last fall, after a month-long trip that included a week-long yoga retreat and a tour of the Amalfi Coast, Pulia and Basilica, she had dental surgery -- and her feet went numb. "So, I called my dentist and said, 'What did you do to my *feet*?' And he said, "I think you need to see a neurologist."

"I'm a contrarian," she admits. "I was told by every neurologist that I had to go on the injectibles, and I knew instinctively I couldn't poke little holes in my body with needles." So, contrary to popular belief -- that neurologists and Western medicine would help her, Jackie instead put herself in the hands of a Reno-based "bio-integrative" doctor, Cora Ibarra. "She's the one who put a face on all my symptoms and called it MS. What she did was make me realize that, often-times, MS is the name for many, many diseases. And through testing and supplements and lots of alternative therapies, she helped me have the bravery that it's taking me not to go to the injectible drugs."

Taking a naturopathic approach to her disease, "I've committed myself to a very different lifestyle," Jackie said. She's changed her diet, going gluten-free, dairy free, eschewing coffee, drinking less wine and eating far less protein. And these days she's feeling very well. Once she had a diagnosis, "I took a three-month sabbatical from work and glued myself to the Internet."

And that's where she learned about an Italian vascular surgeon, Paolo Zamboni, whose [controversial work](#) regarding a condition called Chronic Cerebrospinal Venous Insufficiency (CCSVI) and his theory that MS symptoms may be alleviated through a surgical procedure similar to the one used to repair coronary arteries in angioplasty, has spurred additional research and offered renewed hope for some MS patients. Including the owner of Seattle's Pink Door.

"It's a revolutionary theory, and it's turning the MS world on its head," explains Jackie, who's putting her money where her mouth is to raise funds for ongoing research into [CCSVI](#), now underway at the [University at Buffalo](#) in her home state of New York.

In true Jacqueline di Roberto fashion, she's hosting a grand party June 27 from 5 to 9 p.m., a rip-roaring fundraiser dubbed "[Festa per la Salute!](#)" (translation: party for health). "I'll be throwing every aspect of the Pink Door into one 3-hour party" -- including a feast for the hungry, and for the eyes. Revelers will include "all of the trapeze artists, musicians who've worked for me over the years, dancers, tarot-card readers and stilt-walkers, all giving their time," said Jackie. A master of ceremonies will await attendees at the door, calling out names upon arrival, and those who show up wheelchair-bound will be spirited beyond the Pink Door and down the stairs by hired "he-men."

Seventy percent of the \$100 ticket price (purchased in advance at the Pink Door or by phone at 206-443-3241 prior to June 25) goes directly to the University at Buffalo [Neuroimaging Analysis Center](#), for its ongoing MS-CCSVI research. For those wanting to learn more about CCSVI research -- which Jackie will take part in as a patient as well as a benefactor -- representatives will be on hand during the festa.

"I live joyfully through my passions, so that's a gift" said Jackie, who notes that after 29 years, business is still very good. When she founded the Pink Door in 1981, "I was an expat hippie, and I wanted an underground

restaurant -- and didn't want any written word." Spreading the news of about MS and her hope for the future, "I've found that the Pink Door is giving me an even bigger gift: a platform to educate people about CCSVI."

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