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Photo by Stephen Wunrow

50 YEARS STRONG

Cafe di Napoli tradition keeps on cooking

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It was a cold, overcast day Dec. 8, 1938, when college student Joe Piazza, his father, David, and business partner, Nick Labestra, opened Cafe di Napoli at 816 Hennepin Ave.

But the omen of bad weather didn't deter the men. Now, 50 years later, the collegiate Piazza is age 70 and Cafe di Napoli will celebrate its golden anniversary with a special menu and a string trio playing today (Thursday).

"You know," said Joe Piazza, reflecting on half a century while fidgeting with his watch during an interview at his establishment. "It doesn't really seem like it's been 50 years. Time goes so fast. One year keeps running after the other."

But it's still 1938 at Cafe di Napoli. The

restaurant remains at the site of its origin. Murals of Italy, painted from memory by a Neapolitan, still grace the walls. The original booths, which were recovered 20 years ago, are in place. In fact, the entire dining room has changed little in 50 years.

Piazza is proud of that. When he speaks about the cafe, he points around the room, explaining the tenure of each item. Even people become a part of the litany.

"We had an awful good Italian chef, Vincent Martinelli," he said. "He was here for 25 years and our baker was here for 25 years. I've been with my insurance agent for 21

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(Top) It's all in the family at Cafe di Napoli, where Joe Piazza (second from right) tests a menu offering with his daughter, Nancy (left), son, Dave, and Aunt Gussie. (Above) In the 1950s, Joe shared a booth with another trio, the Andrews Sisters.

Tradition

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years and I was with the guy before him until he died, which was about 26 years. I even buy my candy from the same guy I've done business with for 50 years. He's 92 years old."

Aside from customers growing older and menu items gradually increasing in price, time seems to have stood still inside Cafe di Napoli's walls. But outside on Hennepin Avenue, vagrants roam, many seemingly shell-shocked from the destruction of Block E. It's no wonder Piazza speaks fondly of the past. In 1938, Hennepin Avenue was a thriving boulevard, waitresses made \$10 a week, a complete spaghetti dinner was only 30 cents a plate and cops still walked a beat.

"In those days, we used to sell cigars in the case up front," Piazza said. "When the police walked by the restaurant, they always used to check in and see how everything was. We'd show our appreciation by offering them a cigar."

"One time, two of them came in. I offered a cigar to the first fellow. He pointed to his partner and said, 'Let him take 'em, he's got a bigger hand,'" Piazza laughed as he told the story, grabbing at the air, like a beat cop with a big, meaty paw.

"But that's the way life was in those days," he said. "You always knew the police. It was OK to show appreciation. Things were a lot simpler then."

In "those days," street cars rambled by. Vaudevillians and big-name big bands, who were headliners at the nearby Lyceum, Orpheum and Radio City theaters, often stopped by the restaurant.

Even a comedy duo named Stan Laurel and Oliver Hardy, who were rarely seen together in public, were regulars at Cafe di Napoli.

"They were very nice, very well-mannered," said Gussie Piazza, 85, Piazza's aunt and a 50-year employee. "I knew nobody would believe that they came in to eat. So, one time when they were here, I ran downstairs with my autograph book and they were pleased to sign it."

The reclusive Laurel and Hardy were just two of many prominent patrons happy to sign Gussie's book. In the '40s and '50s, Cafe di Napoli was the see-and-be-seen place. Among the repeat diners who would come back for more spaghetti, manicotti and mostaccioli were the Andrew Sisters, Minneapolis Star Journal columnist Cedric Adams, sportswriter and



Twins announcer Halsey Hall, band leader Jimmy Dorsey, Minneapolis mayor Hubert Humphrey and a high school student from the Iron Range named Rudy Perpich.

"The governor is a very loyal customer," Piazza said. "He's been coming in ever since his high school days, when he was in state (athletic) tournaments. He always would come in for a plate of spaghetti. That's his favorite."

But you don't have to be famous to be well-liked at Cafe di Napoli. George Gubbins and Nate Bolnick have their names engraved, along with Piazza's father, David, on a brass plate in their favorite booth.

"These fellows, who were friends of my father, used to work at the theaters," Piazza said. "One of them worked at the Orpheum, and one of them worked at another one — I don't remember which."

"They used to come in here every day at noon and sit with my father in that booth. From the time they retired until they were about 90 years old, they sat there and talked about things they used to do in their day."

After the trio had died, Piazza put up the plaque as a way of honoring their informal fraternity.

Tradition permeates Cafe di Napoli. "The children of our early customers come in with their children and their grandchildren, because they remember coming in here as a child," he said.



Looking around the dining room at dinner time, an observer may spot parents with babies, parents with college students, parents with their parents, couples eating in the awkward silence of first dates, boisterous teen-age girls squealing at college boys in varsity jackets. Piazza makes an effort to greet them all. The room sings with the vitality of generations. It also smells pretty good, too.

The charm of Cafe di Napoli lies as much in its cuisine as in its tradition.

"That (Star Tribune restaurant reviewer Jeremy) Iggers fellow from the paper came and did a review," Piazza said, grimacing. "He didn't especially care for our type of food, which is his problem. He likes the gourmet type of food. We prepare food for families, not a once-in-a-while gourmet."

Despite that Iggers fellow, some people really love Piazza's food. "We just sent a case of sauce out to Colorado," Piazza said. "A couple who eats with us all the time lives out there. It cost \$70 just to ship it. We sent some to St. Louis last week and it cost \$67 in freight."

But plenty of restaurants with good food fail. Piazza says the cafe has been successful because of his family's commitment.

"We all work together here," he said. "The owners have to actually work. I go into the kitchen to see if anybody needs any help. If the waitresses

Cafe di Napoli has been a hot spot for Downtown diners, but never more so than when fire burned the adjacent Anthony Hotel in the early '70s.

Hamming it up in the kitchen in 1939 were partners Nick Labestra (left), Joe Piazza and an unidentified spaghetti salesman.



Photo by Stephen Wurrow

A print of two of Cafe di Napoli's more prominent patrons decorates one of the restaurant's walls.

need help, we'll pitch in. If the dishwashers need help, we'll help them. When you run a restaurant, you can't be aloof. You have to do it."

So now, 50 years after the grand opening, the Piazza family still is "doing it." Labestra and Piazza's father, David, have long since died, but Aunt Gussie and Piazza still work every day, as does Piazza's daughter, Nancy, and son, Dave.

Piazza, who claims his restaurant is the only one in Minneapolis to have the same location and same owners for 50 years, said he never considered selling Cafe di Napoli. "Irwin Jacobs comes in here for lunch, but he never makes me an offer," he said. "Some people ask me why we don't start a place somewhere else, but I feel that this business is successful because of single ownership. If we had to devote time to another (restaurant), it would be too difficult for the family."

In another 50 years, Piazza hopes that a reporter will come and interview a new generation of Piazzas — but his son isn't sure that will be possible.

"I don't know if I'll follow in his footsteps," he said, pointing to his father, a tornado of energy who was busy putting on his coat, telling a joke, shaking a customer's hand and signaling a waitress to attend to a neglected table — all at the same time.

The younger Piazza laughed. "Does this look like a man who will ever retire?"