



Jim Klobuchar

50 years of saucy memories

Since the Cafe Di Napoli on Hennepin Av. served its first platter of spaghetti for 35 cents in 1938, the world has reeled through waves of Italian food frenzies, from pizza to prosciutto.

Italian cooking since then has inflicted both ecstasy and heartburn on millions, amore as well as premature paunch. We have gone from the dockworker's ravioli to svelte veal piccatas.

So now we have to put the world and 50 years back in perspective. And on Thursday next week, the Cafe Di Napoli — still run by the founding family Piazza and still scented with Parmesan and unapologetic garlic fumes — will serve a platter of spaghetti for 35 cents.

It will for its golden anniversary day. After Thursday, the price sheet of the 1980s is reinstated. The Piazzas may be sentimental but they're not crazy. Yet the bottom line at the Di Napoli is still kind to the pasta freaks. Spaghetti normally goes at \$4.65 a plate. On Thursday, though, the Di Napoli is telling us to come in and dawdle with memories and listen to the mandolins. It will invoke the ghosts of Paul Whiteman, Laurel and Hardy, Jimmy Durante and other show biz superstars who dined at the Di Napoli in the most luminous days of Hennepin Av.

I will be among the hundreds of pilgrims. It isn't because I'm thrifty. It's because I'm homesick. The Di Napoli is passage for me, and for thousands in this town and dozens of other towns. It subjected me to my first plate of big town spaghetti and meatball sauce. It nurtured me through university romances and the subsequent debris. It was a refuge while I waited for the midnight streetcar lineup back to the campus with only \$1.50 in my pocket.

I could get back to school and still haul a small tub of meatballs and fries out of the Di Napoli for my first meal of the weekend. If I put on my best bohemian hangdog look, they would throw in an olive oil salad.

It might have been old Dave Piazza who rescued me once a month from the jaws of malnutrition, or his partner, Nick Labalestra. Or maybe it was Aunt Gussie Piazza or Joe Piazza, the present owner.

The Di Napoli was the place where I was dealt my first humiliation as greenhorn from the Range trying to pass as a boulevardier of downtown. Despite the Di Napoli's modest prices, regulars in those years practiced a form of table-manners snobbery, twirling the spaghetti on their fork instead of using the chop-and-shovel method most people employed in their homes.

For months, I tried to master the effortless wrist and finger technique that wrapped thickening strands of spaghetti around the fork. Finally on a Saturday night in January, I scored a breakthrough. Round and round I globbed the spaghetti on my fork. It got to be hypnotic. I didn't want to stop. It was like building a ball of rubber bands. Then, at the moment I was about to raise the spaghetti triumphantly to my lips, it came unraveled and slopped across the table in its entirety, into the lap of my date.

I caught the streetcar lineup early that night.

The downtown of those years was the downtown of Gmitro's breakfasts, the Gopher Cafe of Hubert Humphrey's impulsive midnight caucuses when he was mayor and senator, Andy's Bar, the 620 Club and the Alvin burlesque. One way or another you could not get through that gauntlet without acquiring some useful knowledge of the world.

The Di Napoli is still a place of sturdy Sicilian and Neapolitan cooking, red leather seats, vats of viscous meatball sauce, honest calories and honest prices. "Sometimes we get three generations of people coming in here for a party, and they all started eating Italian food here," Joe said.

This week I won't twirl the spaghetti. Years ago the victims of slithering spaghetti just glared at you. Today they might sue.