

Reputation helps Tony's NY Pizza stay in black

Americans of Italian heritage can probably identify the personality of Tony D'Agostino in a heartbeat. He's the white-haired uncle with a smile bright enough to light Rome. His laughter is not an isolated incident; it's a contact sport as he extends his arm and gives the person at his side a playful shake.

D'Agostino's accent drips with an accent so rich it could serve as a sauce.

"There are a lot of pisans [Italians], a lot of people from New York here," said the founder, owner and namesake of Tony's N.Y. Pizza.

Tony's is as much of a part of Manassas as the museum or mall with locations along Mathis Avenue and Sudley Manor Drive. When the iconic Mike's Diner closed five years ago, D'Agostino said his business, commonly known for its pizza-by-the-slice selection along with dozens of Italian entrees, spiked 10 percent.

Since then, he opened a third official location at the Bristow Shopping Center between Vint Hill Road and Linton Hall Road. His nephew owns the new Pizza NY Margherita in Gainesville. Ciro's New York Pizza in Centreville spawned from Tony's too.

D'Agostino previously planned to open up in Haymarket on the west side of the U.S. 15-Route 55 intersection. When construction of the Home Depot there stalled, so did D'Agostino's project.

"We've never been really big restaurant," said D'Agostino, who moved to the United States in 1974 as a 23-year-old from Naples, Italy. "We've always tried to be good, family restaurant."

When the economy collapsed in September 2008, Tony's only took a small hit. D'Agostino estimated his total revenues only dropped by 2 to 5 percent. He employs between 25 and 30 workers full time, he said, and about another 15 part time.

"I don't know; maybe it's good food. Maybe price is good," said D'Agostino about how Tony's has stayed in the black.

The first Tony's opened in 1989 in Manassas with seven staffers, including D'Agostino, his wife Rosaria and business partner Vinny Di Giovanni.

Just as it did then, the one-of-a-kind grande mozzarella cheese still comes from Wisconsin. Di Giovanni still makes a custom tortellini rosé, complete with chicken, mushrooms and cream sauce.

"I've been doing this all my life," said Di Giovanni, who worked at restaurants in Italy in his youth before studying English in America and eventually moving here.

D'Agostino and Di Giovanni are naturalized American citizens who both agree that they found more opportunity to run a successful business in the United States than in Italy.

Living in America "goes in your blood," said D'Agostino.

The melting-pot atmosphere of his kitchens helps recreate the New York pizza shop aura as does the itself. At any given time, whether it's in Bristow or Manassas, up to three languages can be heard from behind the counter: English, Spanish and Italian.

Tony's has become popular enough that the name alone helped D'Agostino's brother Giovanni set up shop in

Fair Lakes, even though that one is run independent of the three Prince William/Manassas locations.

"We were already known in Manassas and a lot of people from Manassas worked in Fairfax," he said.

After setting up pizza shops with his younger brother in Leesburg and Martinsburg, W.Va. in the 1970s, D'Agostino came down to Manassas only to find "there was no very good pizza there," he said.

Yet, the clientele was already in place.

"I (would) go to the mall and find a lot of pizans there," said D'Agostino.

One of his biggest keys to success though has simply been to build personal relationships throughout the community, which has expanded rapidly in the last 10 years.

"I'm friends with everybody," D'Agostino said.

He and Di Giovanni now spend most of their time behind the counter daily at the Bristow location, which opened about two years ago.

"When it's new, you need more attention," D'Agostino said.

The 59-year-old admitted that running the business has taken a hit on his social life over the years, but he hopes that with continued success, he can scale back his own role in the new few years.

"I honestly don't see any challenge for me right now," he said. "I like what I'm doing."

Times Community © 2007 | Gainesville Times