An Oregon institution

6 Sep 2009 by Nick Lander/FT but this is longer

The first mouthful of my order of Grandpa Ray's Pizza (US$11) with extra anchovies (US$2) in Nick's Italian Café in downtown McMinnville, Oregon, brought back happy memories of our initial meal there 21 years ago.

Memory and taste buds were undoubtedly helped by the fact that physically, at least, so little had changed in the interim.

The dining room is still laid out in the same formation with comfortable banquette seating for 2s and 4s along the walls and several larger tables in the middle. There are still a few stools in front of the bar that backs on to an open kitchen through which the food is served.

Nor had Nick, or his trademark braces, changed that much. He had in fact just moved, about 10 yards in all, from in front of the bar by the kitchen to the new bar at the back of the café. This former storeroom has now been tastefully converted into a lounge for him, his beloved 1913 Brunswick pool table and anyone who wants to call in for a glass of wine and a plate of antipasti.

This small change does, however, signify a major shift in the role Nick Peirano now plays in the daily running of this café, which he opened it in 1977 and has played a pivotal role for anyone visiting or involved in the burgeoning Oregon wine trade since then.

Periano bought this former diner because, as he admitted, he had little idea of what to do after college and the army and he had even less money. But although he had no formal restaurant training, he arrived with two ingredients that neither money nor even the best training can buy: traditional pasta recipes inherited from his grandmother and an innate aptitude for pizza inherited from his grandfather, Ray.

These dishes have formed the backbone of Nick's menus for the last 30 years. At lunch there is an extensive range of pasta, including a distinguished crab and pinenut lasagne, pizzas (Ray's is a wafer thin, ultra crisp dough topped with olive oil, garlic, rosemary, chili flakes and sea salt) and panini, while the dinner is a five course affair with plenty of choices and extremely good value at US$49 per person.

But two strokes of consummate timing on Nick's part have sealed his café's impressive longevity.

The first was to open just as the growing number of local winemakers needed somewhere to meet for a beer to chew over shared problems or to show off their wines alongside some good food. These tables were always conspicuous by the fact that the number of bottles on or under the table far outnumbered those who were sitting around them.

The second was to take his own advice. Peirano said that his response over the years to anyone asking him whether they should go into the restaurant business has always been that they should only do so if they can stand on their feet for 16 hours a day. After his extensive stint, Peirano finally sold the business to his daughter, Carmen, and Eric, her husband/chef.

Both have been to cooking school and to Italy and both saw two immediate areas for improvement. The first, and only just visible from one of the bar stools, is a new oven that uses the wood Oregon has in such abundance to great effect and is the only fundamental difference in quality between their pizzas and Ray's.

The second was to create the lounge so that there can be a Nick standing in Nick's Italian Café for several more years to come.

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