

“THE DAY THE SAUCE STOPPED FLOWING IN VERONA”

By Frank W. Santucci

One summer day in 1983 a stranger rode into the sleepy town of Verona with his shiny tableware and pots catching the eyes of hungry residents. He took command of a tract of land on the southern plane of the community. Walled on one side by a high protective hillside and open road on the other side, his portfolio stuffed with proven recipes and Italian culture secrets. He was a short unassuming man with a soft spoken voice, dressed neat but not flamboyant. Pizza and beer were the first to make their entry into this much anticipated adventure. My family and I found this place so friendly, accepting of customers and appeared to be just for us.

As the years passed, the menu also grew to classic proportions. My Father, who was a widower, found the sauce so reminiscent of my Mother's and how the staff made him feel extra special. Every week you could find us there with my father sitting waiting for his usual spaghetti dinner to be served. On one particular evening, the owner, Mr. D., stopped by our table mentioning he noticed we were regular customers. Once we explained how much my Father loved their sauce, and how they always made him feel special, Mr. D said we were always welcome there. We thanked him and continued with our dinner. When going to pay our bill, we were informed that my Father's meal was free tonight and from then on there would be no charge for his weekly meals. We were astounded and expressed our appreciation in the owner's acknowledgement of our Father. On our next visit we tried to explain to the owner we were willing to pay for his dinner and not coming just to take advantage of his generosity, but he insisted to continue this treat just for him. My Father Willie was in his late 80's when we started our weekly dinners and in 1994 he passed away at the age of 95.

My extended family continued to find any excuse to visit our distinctive place, eager for a savory feast, brother, sister, children and grandchildren could not get enough of the Italian staples. Their cheerful, excellent waitresses would always bring our favorites to our table as we sat down. The notoriety of the Verona Village Inn was known far and wide over the northeastern communities of Allegheny and Westmoreland Counties. Never a bad meal, never a bad review, and never, never bad service. This was great, but admittedly my selfishness, felt the influx of out-of-towners, at times, made it difficult to get reservations. 34 years, Mollie and I had at least one meal at the Verona Village Inn each week. We had been there for the opening week of pizza and from then on miles and miles of spaghetti, gnocchi, stuffed shells, etc. to fill a box car, and sauce flowing as if it came straight from Rome, Italy.

It was a sad day the owner passed away, but with the son now in command, never a beat was missed feeding the steady customers of Verona and surrounding areas. Many New Year's Eve meals were served over the years, but on New Year's Eve of 2016 a bomb exploded in Verona. No good or glad New Year's tidings, but, aghast, the closure of the Verona Village Inn, effective immediately.

When New Year's Day arrived, there posted on the door of our beloved sauce source, was notice stating the restaurant was out of business. This cannot be true, but alas, true. The newspapers and local television stations covered the closing in the nightly news broadcasts.

What will happen to us? Where can we go for the best comfort food we have enjoyed for all these years?

During the past five weeks, thirty-seven days, eight hundred and eighty-eight hours, we shuttled between Penn Hills, New Kensington, Aspinwall, and Monroeville. Of course we ate, and bellies were full, but our taste buds were starving and we struggled.

January's weather was fairly mild which never prevented us driving in search of a replacement for our Village Inn. BUT, on Monday, February 6th, there in our mail was an announcement stating the Village Inn was re-opening in late February. Hallelujah, it was like winning the Publisher's Clearing House contest! All day the internet was alive spreading the news.

Today we, like so many, many others, are excited to have our sauce back and looking forward to being there for the re-opening, along with all their wonderful waitresses.

Mmmm, just imagine that wonderful smell soon to be wafting through the air.

Welcome back Verona Village Inn.

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