

Pasta Plus Persevering

Brothers from Abruzzo Serving Curbside Cuisine

By Anthony Glaros

We all know the last year and a half has been cruel in ways too numerous to number, and the hospitality business has taken its share of staggering hits. Desperate restaurant owners, many on the brink of extinction, having hunkered down and trying creative approaches to stay in business, are finally returning.

Venture 22 miles north of downtown Washington, D.C., to the suburban town of Laurel, Md., and you will see shining evidence of the perseverance to overcome and succeed that was typical of their Italian immigrant ancestors at Pasta Plus. The tiny eatery, unceremoniously sandwiched in a crumbling, barren strip center, has soldiered on. It's a main ingredient in the recipe for success served up by the Mazziotti brothers—Massimo and Sabatino.

"We've been here for 38 years," Massimo Mazziotti said over a cappuccino as the Covid-19 pandemic seemed to be waning. "It's kind of part of us now."

Mazziotti, 79, a native of hardscrabble Abruzzo who gained experience waiting tables in posh hotels like the Madison in Washington, D.C., is smart in the ways of money and in preserving personal relationships.

"After almost 40 years, my brother and I learned the business," he said. "You think you know it all, and then one day you find out there's a virus going around and you have to close. It's all about life, about...what can and will happen if you don't think ahead without losing the joy and the pleasure."

When Maryland's Covid restrictions last year officially required Mazziotti to close the 90-seat dining room, he went home. "To rest. To refresh. To finally have the time to enjoy long naps," he said. "Most importantly, to spend time with Rosa, my beloved wife."

Later that spring, when authorities loosened restrictions, he reopened the gourmet market opposite the dining area. "No inside," he said. "We had a red-and-blue banner made and we began offering curbside takeout only."

From the first day, cars lined up, often wrapping around the cramped and potholed parking lot where the only other business is an Arby's.

Ever the professional, Mazziotti applied his skills to a new scenario: "Since they wouldn't allow seating in the few tables we have in the market, I decided early on [to] make it a point to come outside as often as possible to the sidewalk and greet my customers. I'm careful not to stick my head inside the car window, but it's what they, and I, are used to.

"I want them to know I'm not inside hiding, burying myself back in the office under a mountain of paperwork,



Sabatino and Massimo Mazziotti

wondering how we're going to make the next payroll. I want them to know I'm still here, I'm still running things. I want them...to know my brother is still back in the kitchen making their *penne al forno* and *zabaglione* for dessert."

And even now, Pasta Plus continues curbside service only.

Mazziotti reminisced about how he got to where he is: "I was reading The Washington Post one Sunday morning, [and] I saw where there was a carryout for sale in a town called Laurel. I had never heard of the place, but Sabatino and I drove up there."

He wasn't aware that Laurel was best known for its racetrack and dive bars popular with soldiers from nearby Fort Meade. Nor was he aware that Gov. George Wallace was shot a few blocks from the restaurant in May 1972 during his ill-fated presidential campaign—the kind of Nation's Capital trivia that comes with the territory.

He was surprised to find that the arcane, backwater town at the confluence of four Maryland counties—Prince George's, Howard, Anne Arundel and Montgomery—lacked Metrobus service, so commuters who didn't want to drive into D.C. had to take the MARC train or Greyhound bus.

Tough decision: Locating to Laurel meant giving up on his dream of offering fine-dining Italian in the K Street Washington corridor with rich attorneys and accountants. But K Street was expensive. After steeping himself in research, he learned that the closest decent, reasonably priced Italian fare was 22 miles northeast in Baltimore's Little Italy. "So we took a chance on Laurel," Mazziotti ▶



Acclaimed Pasta Plus located in a strip mall in Laurel, Md.

Netasha Glaros



Massimo Mazziotti greeting a customer at the curbside at Pasta Plus

said. “We priced it according to what we found people could afford.”

In the decades since, Pasta Plus has won a bevy of awards. The Food Network featured it; PBS was readying a segment for a new show spotlighting good Italian eating. It repeatedly snagged the top spot for Italian in local news radio WTOP’s “Best of” contest,

surpassing Italian spots in closer-in suburbs. The Washington Post has called it “The Taste of Abruzzo in Laurel.” Its restaurant critic Tim Carmen wrote, “This is first-wave-immigrant cooking, done with care and craft... I adore its red-sauce soul.”

Thinking back on more than a year of the pandemic, Mazziotti said,

“This sounds unusual, but I worry about all the other hard-working restaurant owners out there. They don’t have to be Italian, but, naturally, my thoughts turn there first.

“I’m not an educated man and hardly a marketing expert. I was raised poor on a farm in my hometown of Pescara. We ate what we raised. And my parents taught us from the time we were practically babies of the value of money, the benefits of sharing what we have. When we all do well, the whole world smiles.” ▲

Tony Glaros is a longtime feature reporter in his native Washington, D.C. His stories have appeared in The Washington Post, Baltimore Sun and in an array of local and regional publications. He splits his time between Boulder, Col., and the nation’s capital.

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