

THE ITEM



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theitemnews@hotmail.com

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RYE

The Item

Poppy's makes patrons part of the family

By Ann Denion Hoskins

The only thing to come between Poppy's owner Gerry Massinello and her customers is the long counter which was already in place when she and her father bought the restaurant in 1986. Sometimes, there's not even that.

"How many places can you go where the customers can serve themselves?" asked regular patron Margaret Whitehouse, as another regular, Mike Scagrove, 41, wandered behind the counter and poured himself a glass of milk.

"They come in and serve themselves, then pay and leave a nice tip,"

said Massinello of her customers.

Before Poppy's was Poppy's, it was The Potted Palm, which opened about 40 years ago. Then, for about 15 years, it was Harry Stein's Coffee Shop. It took brief turns as Cafe Joseph and the Gallery Cafe before Massinello stepped in and renamed it after her dad.

"My father couldn't even boil water, and he wanted to start a food business," said Massinello. He came up with the idea when her mother and aunt sold the Baskin Robbins franchise they had owned in Rye for 20 years, she added.

Already the mother of Cindy and Steve when Poppy's opened,



Massinello said she "winged it" at first. "In the beginning it was scary, but after that it was great," she said, crediting the customers with being "very patient" as she and her father

learned the ropes.

Massinello said her children were the first to call her father, a retired Rye policeman, "Poppy." She picked it up, too, and eventually, everyone who came into the place called him "Poppy."

Customer Nick Marino, 66, a 43-year Rye resident, said he knew Poppy as Bob Chapderlane, who worked for the Department of Public Works after retiring from the police force.

"[He] was one of the most well-liked guys in Rye," Marino said, adding that Chapderlane played the drums for bands called AH Gales and The Phil-mars and loved to play football. "Everybody loved Poppy," he said of Chapderlane, who died five years ago of cancer.

With the exception of newcomer Mark Iannarelli, 27, who has been working behind the counter for about a year, Poppy's is run by women. The staff includes Lynda DeRenzis, who's been there since Poppy's opened; 10-year Poppy's veteran JoAnn Amico; Massinello's mother, Hilda Chapderlane; and her aunt, Irma Buxxeder.

Massinello, DeRenzis and Amico cook, and Iannarelli, Chapderlane and Buxxeder serve — but "everybody does everything," said Massinello. That includes keeping up the banter. "It's not for the weak of heart," said Scagrove. "You have to have a rough exterior."

On Tuesday morning, the topic turned to cell phones. Massinello said she doesn't like it when customers talk on their cell phones when she's trying to take their order. "I walk away and come back to the table after they hang up," she said.

Marino chimed in that he can't be bothered to use the cell phone he received as a gift. "Mine's sitting next to my George Foreman grill," he said. "It's always on charge."

Customers agreed that the warm, family atmosphere and freshly-made food keeps them coming back to Poppy's. Stacks of Drake's coffee cakes and Devil Dogs line the counter, and big jars of peanut butter and jelly fill the shelves. The all-day breakfast features eggs any way and home-baked muffins, and every day there is a different lunch special.

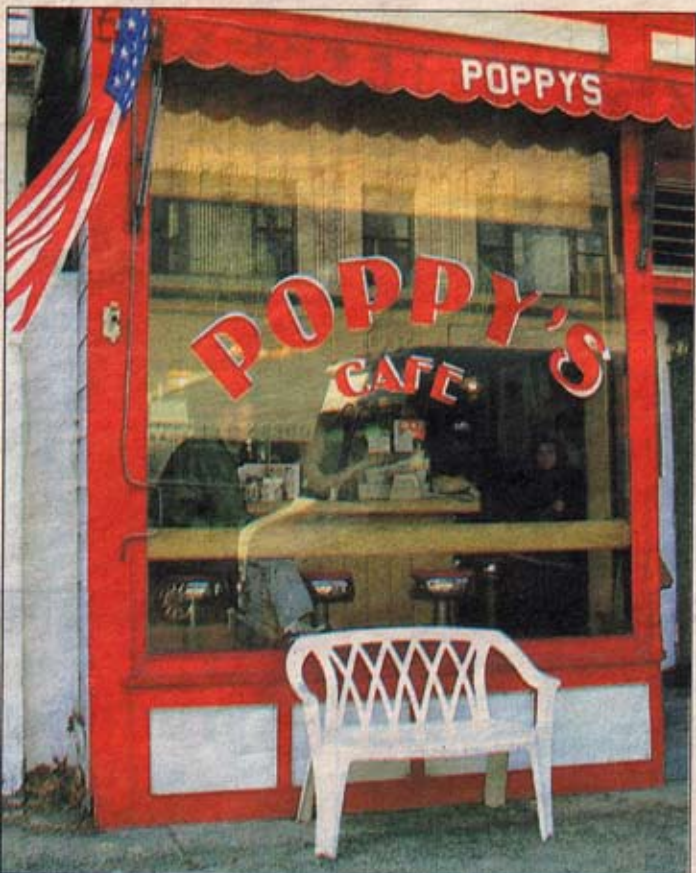
"They have the best chili anywhere," said Marino.

Customer Arthur Whitehouse pointed to an array of sports trophies, and noted that Poppy's is also a great sponsor of youth athletics.

"They are a good-bearded group," agreed his wife, Margaret.

She said her fondest memory of Poppy's comes from the time she broke her jaw and Poppy's was the only place she could get food she could drink.

"Gerry would whip up the potatoes and gravy and make it possible," she said.



Ann Denion Hoskins/The Item

Poppy's Cafe, on Purchase Street in Rye.