

Pasta Shoppe tomato a Port landmark

Written by MARK JAEGER

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Family-friendly dining, consistently good food are restaurant's hallmarks

It could be argued that the giant tomato sign that hangs outside the Pasta Shoppe Restaurant is the second-most familiar landmark of Port Washington, trailing only St. Mary's Church which towers nearby.

"Our sign has become a very popular meeting point for out-of-town visitors and even people meeting for blind dates," said Maria Kiesow, who has owned the popular dining spot with her husband Jim for 40 years.

They bought the former Sammy's Pizza at 323 N. Franklin St. in 1973 almost on a whim. The original restaurant was operated by Sammy Marchese.



"I would come to Port Washington from Milwaukee because I loved fishing, and one day I noticed the pizza parlor was for sale," Jim Kiesow said.

"Since buying the business, I really haven't had much time for fishing anymore."

He said he was originally interested in just buying the business, but officials at Port Washington State Bank said they would give the couple a business loan if they agreed to buy the building, too.

"The bank has been great. They have worked with us all along and just last week taught us how to do online banking," Maria Kiesow said.

After the purchase, the Kiesows kept the name Sammy's Pizza for two years before a little menu creativity forced a change.

"We wanted to start serving lasagna, so we came up with the name the Pasta Shoppe. That

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was at a time when a lot of people didn't even know what pasta or lasagna was," Maria Kiesow said.

Pasta in its many forms has become the most popular item on the menu. The couple estimate about two-thirds of the entree orders are for pasta, with the remainder mostly pizza.

In any case, the menu items are prepared with fresh ingredients, some coming from family gardens or the local farmers market.

"I think what makes people keep coming back is the consistency of our food. It is always good and they know they will like it," Maria Kiesow said.

Jim and Maria Kiesow both had extensive restaurant experience before buying their business 40 years ago.

He worked at Barbieri's Italian restaurant in Milwaukee, and she helped at the Beyond the Sea restaurant her grandmother owned.

"I was born with the restaurant business in my blood. I was cleaning calamari from when I was big enough to stand at the sink," Maria said.

Jim Kiesow made the restaurant his driving passion, and his wife helped whenever she wasn't working as a nurse.

"Running a restaurant isn't a job. It is a lifestyle," he said.

Maria Kiesow said it doesn't take long for people to realize how much work is involved in running a restaurant.

"We're friends with the people who opened the Twisted Willow. They've been open for two months, and my friend asked me, 'How did you manage to do this for 40 years?'" she said.

Still, Maria said, the restaurant welcomes the influx of dining options.

The Kiesows said the key to a successful business is hiring the right people.

"We have had the benefit of some really great managers and staff," Maria Kiesow said, noting that some employees have worked there for nearly 20 years.

"We have had entire families work for us through the generations. A lot of times, the younger workers will leave for college in the fall but come back to work during Christmas break and summer," she said.

The restaurant has a staff of 35, including the couple's daughter Katie Kucharski.

The Kiesows said the workers form a tight-knit family a very welcoming environment. Over the

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years, three different pairs of coworkers have fallen in love and gotten married.

“What is appealing about our restaurant is that it is very much a family friendly setting that is also a popular ‘date night’ destination,” Maria Kiesow said.

Playing off that family theme, the restaurant covers its tables with large sheets of white paper. A supply of crayons is always available for those who want to customize the decor.

“We got the idea because it was cheaper than linen, but the customers seem to love it,” Maria Kiesow said.

Over the years, a number of drawings have been saved by employees who were captivated by the creativity that emerged while waiting for a pizza.

The restaurant has developed a loyal customer base, including a close circle of friends who gather every Friday night to celebrate special and routine life events.

“We have some customers who have been coming in two times a week for 30 years,” Maria Kiesow said.

The regulars know that Saturday is the night to enjoy homemade specials prepared by Maria.

“That is the night I like to try new things,” she said.

The business has gone through some changes, including a remodeling in 1981 when their family’s upstairs residence was converted to dining space.

After a second remodeling in 1998, the restaurant’s seating capacity was increased to 99 diners. Increasingly, summer customers have chosen to dine on the cafe tables available at the front of the building.

A full-service bar is also available, but the Kiesows said drink sales only account for about 15% of their business.

The restaurant also makes frozen pizzas that are sold at local bars and grocery stores.

“They may cost a little more than other frozen pizzas, but they taste just like the ones we serve. We use the same ingredients,” Maria Kiesow said.

The Kiesows said their favorite menu items are the speidini —stuffed medallions of beef — and Italian baked cod.

Their daughter was a little more hard-pressed to come up with a favorite.

“After 28 years of eating here you might think I would be sick of it, but I am a pasta fanatic,” Katie Kucharski said.

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The restaurant is in the middle of a four-month run of specials being offered to celebrate the anniversary.

The restaurant opens daily at 4:30 p.m. The phone number is 284-9311.

Image Information: FOR FORTY YEARS, the Pasta Shoppe has been the dining spot of choice for those craving Italian food in Port Washington. Owners Jim and Maria Kiesow and their daughter Katie Kucharski pride themselves on maintaining a family-friendly environment for customers and employees.

Photo by Mark Jaeger