

Actually, it was Caroma

Syracuse
Cultural workers
lead us to
remember the
three sisters
and their secret
sauce

By Nancy Keefe Rhodes

Several weeks ago we printed a story entitled "A clean, well-lighted place: Syracuse Cultural Workers still here after 27 years." The print edition carried what we call a "teaser" – an introduction and some photos – ending with encouragement to go to Eagles Newspapers' Web site, cnylink.com, and click A&E, where a longer interview with some of Syracuse Cultural Workers' founders and staff awaited.

SCWlocatesitsstorefront shop, Tools for Change, and its international mail-order business and production offices on Lodi Street just south of James, on the edge of the historic Hawley-Green neighborhood on Syracuse's near northside. The building used to house a family restaurant whose name I misspelled in the article. Barbara Fioramonte Locke, who used to be director of NEHDA (Northeast Hawley Development Association), wrote to tell



The three sisters who made up Syracuse's Caroma were Carmel Sacco, Rose Wadenole and Mary D'addario.

COURTESY OF ROSEMARIE WEATHERUP

me so.

She added, "At the risk of sounding like I am scolding you, it is more than spelling. The restaurant was a piece of neighborhood history. The name was a combination of the first names of the three sisters who owned and operated it."

We couldn't agree more – especially when this occurred in the context of an article about an outfit that has long made "people's history" the center of their

work. This seemed like one of those cases that deserves more than a standard little box correction.

Queried about Caroma during the busy last days before Christmas, Onondaga Historical Association's executive director Gregg Tripoli found some answers within a couple hours.

"Caroma's was opened on Dec. 7, 1941 and closed on its 40th anniversary Dec. 7, 1981," he wrote back by e-mail. "It was owned

and operated by the three sisters, CARMel, ROse, and MArY, in a building that was owned by their father (they grew up across the street). The restaurant was a neighborhood favorite and a landmark Italian restaurant in Syracuse. The sisters learned to cook from their mother, Rosina (who was the inspiration for the restaurant style. Everything was made from scratch, including the pasta and the sausage. Each

sister had their own specialty: Rose made the sauce and lasagna, Mary did all the specialty cooking (veal Marsala, chicken cacciatore, and steaks) and Carmel did all the baking."

The three married daughters of Rosina and John Gelormini were Carmel Sacco, Mary D'Addario and Rose Wadenole.

See Caroma, page 8

Caroma

From page 1



COURTESY OF ROSEMARIE WEATHERUP

From Caroma's opening night (clockwise) Sam Nappi; Sam's cousin, Tony Nappi; Carmel's husband, Jim Sacchi; Rose Wadenole; Cousin Dolly Geloremini; Uncle Mike Geloremini.

Long-time Syracuse columnist Mario Rossi noted in 1983 that when Caroma opened – coinciding with Pearl Harbor – the main item was a heaping plate of spaghetti and meatballs that cost 30 cents.

NEHDA's Alberta DeStefano sent me to local attorney Frank D'Addario, a nephew of Mary, who sent me to Rose's daughter, Rosemarie "Ro" Weatherup. She was five when Caroma opened and she later worked as the hostess. On New Year's Eve morning, we sat down to talk and she shared her collection of photos and clippings. Reviews and columns through the years have used terms like "blessed" and "flawless." In a 1977 issue of Syracuse Guide, Don Federman caught some of the ambiance when he observed about ethnic family restaurants, "My first criterion of excellence is the noise level... [In] my favorite family Italian restaurant, ...naturally, the noise level [is] never less than a mild din."

"It opened first in one side of the building and then expanded," Rosemarie explained. "My mother and Carmel would take your order, cook it and bring it back to you. It was a three-girl operation. We were closed on Sundays – my father said that was for church and family – except later we decided to try Mother's Day. But that weekend the

Pompeian Players always had a show, so Saturday night they'd come in late – they'd promise not to stay long, but they'd get to singing...."

Rosemarie laughed and shook her head.

Eventually Caroma employed husbands and cousins and kids: besides Rosemarie, her brother Ted and her uncle Mike Gelormini as bartenders, her cousin Connie Mazella and Connie's brother Nick Colaneri (also known from his community theater roles with the Pompeian Players), Carmel's husband Jimmy and their son John Sacco, now an anesthesiologist, Mary's husband, Peter (Sonny) D'Addario and their son John, also a doctor, Sam Nappi and his cousin Tony, the sisters' cousin Dolly Gelormini. There were two other Gelormini sisters – Anna Mazella (who helped in the kitchen) and Rachel (who was occupied with her husband's business, the Eastwood Sports Center). Rose's husband Ted also worked there part-time, Rosemarie recalled.

"My father was a butcher," she said. "He cooked every Monday night because that was his day off – he had the meat department in a Silver Star Market owned by the Gordon family. The men would flock in on Mondays and want 'whatever Teddy made.'"

Along with hostessing,

family learned the family cooking secrets and attitude toward customer service.

"Mary taught me to make meatballs by touch – if the meat was sticky, it was right. We had a doctor who came in every night and the third booth was his. My mother would say, 'Let's see, it's Monday. He'll want a steak, a little macaroni and applesauce.' We never offered applesauce on the menu. It was just for him."

Although the cooking style was Neapolitan – from the Italian city of Naples – Rosemarie was hesitant to define that style.

"It was just what we had at home," she laughed. "We thought it was normal."

Rosemarie recalls Carmel's pies as the most popular desserts ("Red raspberry pie was the favorite of my doctors") though the brownie a la mode had another audience ("Every policeman in Syracuse had that with his take-out order"), while the cake was a distant "last resort."

The family sold Caroma in 1981, forty years to the day of its opening. Under new ownership, it lasted less than two years.

"We very seldom used ads – we never had to. It was word of mouth. Even the inspectors ate at our place! But my mother never wanted us to work as hard," Rosemarie said.

"And you really need at least two people. Of my generation, there was just me. My brother was a CPA, Mary and Carmel's sons were doctors. Now, my son would like to open a restaurant, but you know it's a lot harder now. The man who bought it was named McCarthy. Some of us worked there. I hostessed and the girls made sauce, but on one condition. He had to buy certain tomatoes and they would bring the spices. That worked for a while but then he bought cheaper tomatoes and they quit."

That sauce recipe has never gone outside the family either.

"I have it," Rosemarie said. "It's in a safe. But we had the hardest time getting them to give us recipes because the sisters didn't measure the way a cookbook does. But people remember – I can't shop in Wegman's without somebody stopping me."

Special thanks to those who responded so generously in order to fill in this piece of local history. We appreciate all letters from our readers, but this one – appropriate to the season – was a real gift. Read this article online and see more photos, courtesy of Rosemarie Weatherup, at cnylink.com – click A&E. Nancy covers the arts. Reach her at nancykeeferrhodes@gmail.com.