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Why a Cheesecake Crossed the River

Junior's cheesecakes, pride of Brooklyn since 1950, are now baked in Burlington, where a huge plant is expected to crank out 2 million this year, more next year.

By Jill P. Capuzzo

When Harry Rosen opened Junior's restaurant on Flatbush Avenue in Brooklyn in 1950, he knew one thing. "If you wanted to be a great restaurant in New York," says his grandson, Alan Rosen, "you had to have a great cheesecake." Harry and his German baker, Eigil Peterson, tasted the city's leading cheesecakes, from Lindy's to the Brass Rail, then created their own—a denser, less sweet cheesecake that put Junior's on the map.

Junior's cheesecake is still on the map—but not where Harry, who died in 1996 at age 92, left it. This summer, Rosen and his older brother, Kevin, who

co-own the business, moved the baking operation roughly 80 miles southwest to Burlington in South Jersey.

Much as crossing the Hudson would have startled Harry, he might have been more astonished that Rosen says he expects to sell 2 million cheesecakes this year, double the number sold last year, when the cakes were baked in a cramped facility in Queens. (The cakes served in the flagship restaurant on Flatbush Avenue are still baked on premises.)

The expanded output—which also includes quantities of layer cakes and other baked goods—is made possible by the 103,000-square-foot baking

plant the company took over and refitted near the Delaware River.

Most amazing is that the 7-acre facility—with three buildings, seven loading docks and 14 ovens (five of which have yet to come on line)—will not even be operating at full capacity. For 2016, Rosen says he expects to easily exceed 2 million cheesecakes.

Who knew there was so much demand for cheesecake?

Rosen, 46, has spent much of his life building that demand. Like his brother, he grew up in the original Brooklyn restaurant. His first job was wiping counters and setting out paper doilies

CHEESE WIZ: Alan Rosen, third generation of his family to run Junior's, moved its baking to Burlington to boost production of its famous cheesecakes.

on which to display cheesecakes, danishes and other baked goods. After graduating from Cornell's School of Hotel Administration, he joined the

family firm full-time. During his life, Junior's has expanded from one restaurant to four and created a large mail-order business that ships cheesecakes around the country and the globe to locations as far-flung as Dubai and Japan.

In 1995, Junior's signed a contract with QVC to sell its baked goods over the cable shopping network. Rosen appears on camera on QVC about 50 times a year, selling a total of 150,000 or more cakes, mostly cheesecakes. One of the benefits of the Jersey move for Rosen, who lives with his wife in Great Neck, New York, is that the new facility is just an hour's drive from QVC's studio in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Rosen turned an office in the new plant into a bedroom for days when he has to work late or drive to QVC.

Rosen began shopping for a larger facility in 2012. He considered Carlstadt, but didn't find exactly what he needed until last year, when Mother's Kitchen, which bakes cheesecakes for Buffalo-based Rich Products Corporation, moved from Burlington to Texas. Out-of-state corporations often seek tax abatements or other incentives to relocate to New Jersey, but not Junior's.

"We didn't even ask," he says. "This facility presented itself, and we jumped at the opportunity. I just wanted to get it done."

About 20 people who worked in the old bakery in Maspeth, Queens, moved to Burlington, where Junior's hired about 65 local workers to bring the staff to about 85.

The cheesecakes are baked the same way as ever. Apart from chocolate swirl, strawberry, or other embellishments, the only ingredi-

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shrimp, chickpeas, and chunks of chicken, salami and apple—is better than the iceberg wedge, drowned under bacon-vinaigrette in addition to blue cheese dressing. Fish and chips (\$31) comes out flaky and crunchy, accompanied by thick rods of Yukon Gold fries dusted with malt-vinegar powder.

For dessert, the sticky toffee pudding, based on a recipe by Ramsay's mother, delivers deliciously dense date cake smothered in toffee caramel with vanilla ice cream. It sells even better than the beef Wellington.—**DANYA HENNINGER**

SOUTH + PINE



MORRISTOWN

FOOD: New American

AMBIENCE: Shabby chic with a wink

SERVICE: Upbeat and engaged

WINE LIST: BYO

PRICES: Appetizers, \$9-\$14; entrées, \$18-\$28; sides, \$5; desserts, \$10

HOURS: *Dinner:* Monday through Thursday, 5 to 9:30 PM; Friday and Saturday, 5 to 10:30 PM; Sunday, 5 to 9 PM. *Lunch:* Monday through Friday, 11:30 AM to 4 PM. *Brunch:* Saturday and Sunday, 11 AM to 3 PM

AX, D, MC, V, ♿

90 South Street, Morristown
(862-260-9700; southandpine.com)

On South + Pine's website, chef/co-owner Leia Gaccione bills herself as "chief cook + bottle washer." I don't know about the bottles, but the Ball jar in which she served a terrific panna cotta last summer with cherries and candied pistachios was sparkly clean. As for cooking, she sure can.

There's a wink in that self-deprecating description, and it enlivens every dish at South + Pine, which Gaccione named for its location on Morristown's burgeoning restaurant row, South Street, near the corner of Pine.

The servers wear black T-shirts that say S+P, a felicitous abbreviation for a restaurant, though you won't need to add salt or pepper to Gaccione's food. The Passaic native, 32, graduated from the New York Restaurant School in

2003, worked at Raymond's in Montclair, Son Cubano in Manhattan and other places before catching on with Bobby Flay, a man not shy with spices. From 2008 to 2014, Gaccione served at various times as executive chef or chef de cuisine of Flay's Mesa Grill, Bar Americain and Gato in Manhattan; Mesa Grill in Las Vegas; and Bar Americain at Mohegan Sun.

Gaccione assisted Flay as a sous in three of his *Iron Chef* battles. On the phone, she told me she learned from him "the importance of balance in a dish," be it sweet/spicy, sour/soothing, or creamy/crunchy. She learned well.

Opening South + Pine last May, Gaccione tempered summer's heat with several artful dishes. There was her spicy green gazpacho, as she called it. Made from green tomatoes, cucumbers, fennel and bell peppers puréed with lemon juice, olive oil and a touch of jalapeños, it was thick, creamy, and sumptuously enhanced with a poached-shrimp salsa featuring chunks of ripe avocado. Green tomatoes, this time cornmeal-crusted and fried to a happy crisp, complemented a luscious lump of burrata in an arugula salad. Fresh peaches, Gruyère and duck confit blended beautifully on a hot, crisp flatbread showered with arugula.

"I want this to be a really good neighborhood spot," she told me, "the kind of place I would want to go to where the food is really good and fresh, but it's casual and affordable."

South + Pine is especially affordable at lunch, where a terrific Angus burger with fried egg, house-smoked cheddar, bacon aioli and hand-cut fries is \$15. Gaccione lavishes no less care on her \$9 S+P salad, a mix of bibb lettuce, radicchio and arugula in a buttermilk dressing with sunflower seeds, grapes, cucumbers and grated ricotta salata.

Prices are somewhat higher at dinner. But even at the vaunted Jockey Hollow Bar & Kitchen (separated from South + Pine by the Mayo Performing Arts Center), you won't find a fish dish more outstanding than Gaccione's \$26, pan-seared, butter-basted bronzino. It comes with a vivacious retinue of smoked corn relish, basil pesto and a roasted-tomato purée sparked with Calabrian chilies. Hanger steak with horseradish hollandaise and crunchy fries was exemplary. The prici-

winning crunch, with whole walnuts pressed into the crisp, airy batter.

One of the best things I ate a table-mate aptly dubbed a "Shanghai burrito." It's a hot, lightly crisped scallion pancake wrapped around a filling of marinated beef, omelet, hoisin sauce and fresh cilantro. Unbeatable finger food. It is listed on the dim sum menu as egg pancake with beef, but is available all the time.

Dim sum, by the way, draws a crowd. Shanghai 46 has its own parking lot. We pulled in at noon on a recent Sunday and were lucky to grab the 40th, and last, spot (I counted the cars). Inside, all 120 seats were taken, and every person was Asian.

Shanghai dim sum ranges from hot dumplings to cold chunks of smoked carp and cold chunks of boiled chicken marinated in rice wine. All kinds of cold dishes are covered in plastic wrap and placed on a central table. Help yourself. A server will figure out what you had, even if you cleaned your plate, and charge accordingly. Since the plates are identical but the prices aren't, that is a neat trick.

In my visits, I barely skimmed the 140-plus dishes on the regular menu or the 49 dim sum items. There are some pitfalls. The prettiest dish I ate was seafood-chive dumplings, star-shaped quadrants with open tops. Each compartment was filled with an ingredient of a different color, but the fillings (the seafood was shrimp) were bland and the dumpling skin tough. Spare ribs with sweet brown sauce were grossly fatty, as were the chunks of limp-skinned meat in the Shanghai marinated-duck appetizer. Large spicy prawns in the shell were hard to handle and the meat was tough.

Lin, trying to please all, lards his menu with the familiar. General Tso's chicken was executed with no special spark. Skewers of chicken satay were dry and flavorless. That is no way to bring good fortune—the Chinese character for which remains on the menu and on the sign outside.—**ERIC LEVIN**

★★★★ Extraordinary

★★★ Excellent

★★ Very good

★ Good

★ Fair



ORANGERIE: Workers at the Junior's plant box fresh cheesecakes. The operation uses about 40,000 pounds of cream cheese a week.

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ents in the classic version (still the best seller) are Philadelphia brand cream cheese (about 40,000 pounds per week), heavy cream, eggs, vanilla and sugar. The ingredients are mixed in motorized vats that are gentle giants—able to blend the makings without adding air, so the cake comes out uniformly dense. The batter is pumped into springform pans placed on large, shallow trays filled with an inch of water. The water bath, as it's called, creates humidity for even baking without scorching.

Each oven has nine rotating tiers holding 50 cheesecakes each. During the hour or more of baking, a worker checks the color. "Some people think cheesecakes should be white like a sheet of paper," Rosen says. "I think

they should be golden brown, like something that was actually baked in an oven."

Afterwards, each oven's 450 cakes cool for two to three hours before being boxed and frozen for shipment. The big question for fans is, how do Burlington cheesecakes compare with those from Queens and the Flatbush Avenue second floor?

"If anything," says Rosen, "the quality of our cakes is better." With nine ovens on line, "the cold batter goes directly into the oven and doesn't have to wait and get a skin on top."

Ever vigilant, Rosen likes to quote his father, Walter, who no doubt heard the same cautionary advice from his father, Harry: "It takes years to earn a reputation and only moments to lose it." ■