

You're So Old School

Progress has its place, but these businesses have built their success on sustaining tradition

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Businesses have to be flexible, ready to respond to the changes of a fickle public. So goes the logic that drives many enterprises. There's another way of running a business, however, that dares to believe there's no school like the old school. That suggests that people, and their needs, remain constant, and that people want their needs met with stability. Every city in the area has shops and restaurants that exemplify this philosophy, and food businesses tend to succeed in ignoring the siren call of progress better than others. Just think of the ice cream places that are about to open their shutters—or have already. (The Sno-man has been serving through this last blast of winter.)

Famous Lunch in Troy hasn't changed much since 1949, when the aqua-enameled porcelain, steel walls and booths were installed. The business has been in the same Greek-American family since 1932, when it opened to offer mini hotdogs to a hungry public. Quick Lunch, as it was then known, survived and thrived in the Depression, offering working people fast, affordable food long before fast food became a way of life. The place became "Famous" when a soldier from Troy stationed in Russia ordered dozens of hot dogs to celebrate the United States ambassador's birthday.

The same manufacturers made the primary ingredients—hot dogs and buns—for more than 50 years. Troy Pork Store made the three-inch dogs until they closed in 2004. A bakery in Green Island that operated for 101 years made the buns. Now Hemboldt's makes the meat, and Bella Napoli makes the buns, both in Troy.

"We've always done breakfasts. We've always done the french fries all hand cut," says owner Scott Vasil.

While a chicken sandwich was added to the menu in the 1990s, recipes for rice pudding and zippy sauce are the same. Prices and hours, however, have not been static.

"They used to be open 24 hours a day and, I want to say 30-something years ago, we started closing on Sundays," says Vasil. Hours were abbreviated then, too, and the shop closed from 2 AM till 5 AM. "Back then you had Cluett & Peabody, you had Garden Way manufacturing the rototillers, the steel mills in South Troy. You had Bendix and Norton Company across the way in Green Island. You had all these manufacturing companies around, so they were running three shifts. They were just producing product, so there was quite a bit of people going to work at 11 o'clock."

Famous Lunch is now open 7 AM to 10 PM Monday through Saturday.

Rodino's is another Troy staple. The tuxedo and tailor shop began as just a tailor shop in 1948, in the 15th Street storefront that has since become the Polish restaurant Muza. Joseph Rodino sold a few ties and rental tuxedos, and in 1952 he bought a building around the corner on Congress Street to expand the tuxedo end of his business. As recently as May of last year, Joseph Rodino, who is now 88, was coming to the shop to do some work.

His son Michael Rodino now runs the store, and tailor Paulo (Paul) Ritmo works downstairs, sewing. Ritmo came from Sicily in 1965, and started working with the Rodinos two years later. He remembers the history of the store, and the off-site tailoring that used to be a part of the operations: in a building up on Pawling Avenue for 15 years, and the old St. Francis elementary school for another 10 to 12. When things were very busy, Rodino's had three custom tailors and three or four seamstresses to handle orders. More employees worked the retail end, selling clothes, and accessories for formal wear.

Custom tailors can build a one-of-a-kind suit from a bolt of cloth, and both Joseph Rodino and Paulo Ritmo trained in Italy. Not so many people take advantage of Ritmo's art anymore, but the shop is the preference for a legion of faithful Troy customers. The Brooks Brothers store in Manchester, Vt., refers people to the shop to have suits tailored.

"We were told if we wanted it done right we had to come here," Michael Rodino says he hears from his out-of-the-area customers. Locals, he says, "come specifically for Paul. They say, 'We have faith that Paul could come up with something.' [Tailors] become almost like artists, with certain jobs."

The store was remodeled in the '70s by an Italian cabinetmaker who fit cedar around the rooms and built cabinets to display the accessories. The inside feels like stores of that era, stores where you went for school clothes: Pressman's, the Armory in Cohoes. Racks hold white and black tuxedos and black rental suits that people use for funerals, or to wear to a wedding. There's a section of vintage clothes, including a whole rack of ruffled tux shirts for sale.

"We hold our own in the rental business in Troy," Michael Rodino says. "A lot of people have been opting to buy, and we sell them accessories. The tailoring business is consistent, but not enough to run the whole show."

Which has caused him to think of changing things a little, selling off all the retail clothes and focusing solely on the rental and sale of tuxedos. The idea, however is just an idea. For now, Rodino's is Rodino's, with Paul the tailor ready to shape your clothes to fit.

Across the river, Will Yager has built his barbering business on an old fashioned frame. In 2006 he bought The Executive Cutter and renamed it Patsy's, which was the original enterprise. Using old photographs, he redid the interior as close to original specs as possible, down to a brass coat rack he found in an antique store on Madison Avenue.

"I've always had an affinity for the architecture," explains Yager, "the whole old school vibe of Albany. The place screams old Albany, you can practically see Legs Diamond sitting in the chair."

Patsy Pagliese started cutting hair near Albany's capital in the 1920's. His barbershop was built into the National Savings Bank in 1930, and the barber cut the hair of five governors in the shop. Will Yager's great grandfather was one of the barbers who worked for Patsy. In 1986 Pagliese sold the business, and the owner installed some modern hair washing sinks. Other than the sinks, the shop matches the pictures William Pagliese, Paty's son, gave Yager.

Six Koker barber chairs, their covering various shades of green seem like time machines, only when you sit in them you stare yourself in the face, in a row of mirrors. The mirrors are divided by mahogany trim and cupboards, and each station has its own cupboard and tool drawer. The station that belonged to a man named Murph shows signs of his years of use; the barber had a club hand and the cupboard door is scarred from his opening it. Inside, the numbers he ran for people are marked.

The floor is green and white tiled, and beveled mirrors decorate a wall in Skyscraper Deco. A case at the back of the store, near an old manicurist's marble table, holds old tools of the trade: ivory handled razors carved with designs, soap brushes, and bottles for witch hazel and antiseptics. Wifi and internet radio brings the frozen setting up to date.

"I feel like it's always been in my blood," Yager says when asked about his motivation to cut hair. "When we were young punk rockers on Lark Street, we were always doing each other's hair. Dyed it, cut it, shaved it, I just always knew, it felt right. I've done everything else in the world. I've gone to college. I've been a bartender, a bouncer. I've got my class A driver's license. I can drive a truck. I'm licensed in many professions but this is the one I'm going to be doing – whether it's next week or whether I'm 88 – till I'm dead."

Yager calls his shop a Barberlon because they serve both men and women. He loves the social nature of the work, and it's this quality, perhaps, that links all of these old school places. At Famous Lunch you are treated like a regular whether you are one or not. People seek out Paul the tailor at Rodino's. Yager's developing quite a loyal following, too.

"Today it's like a faceless society," muses Famous Lunch's Scott Vasil. "For me, I'd rather go to the bank. There's a little bit of stimulation, there's something there. Keybank wants you to do all the banking online. They don't want to know who you are. It's not a real relationship and that's progress, I guess, but for me, I'd rather not do that."