

Family slicing pizza 40 years

THREE GENERATIONS OF SCHIANOS involved in operating Mama's Pizza in Hackettstown.

BY STEPHEN J. NOVAK
The Express-Times

HACKETTSTOWN | It was 1970 when Antonio and Vincent Schiano, two recently immigrated Italian brothers, opened a pizzeria in the Hackettstown Mall.

Forty years later, many things have changed. The restaurant has moved across Mountain Avenue and expand-

ed, both in size and culinary offerings, as the town around it also grew.

But the name — Mama's, for Antonio's wife Antonietta — has remained the same, as has the Schiano family's management.

"It's a great story. It's a very Americana kind of story," said David Rucki, director of the

| PLEASE SEE SCHIANOS, B1



Three generations of the Schiano family are involved in the Mama's Pizza & Cafe Baci business in Hackettstown. Pictured in this photo taken last month, from left, are Anthony, Luigi, Antonietta, Tom and Thomas Jr.

Continued from B1

SCHIANOS: Family slicing pizza 40 years

Hackettstown Business Improvement District. "A family started a small business, stayed in town and it grew."

Thomas Schiano and his brother, Luigi, took over what is now Mama's Pizza and Cafe Baci from their father and uncle, after having started work there as youngsters. One day, they plan to turn over the business to their sons, Thomas Jr. and Anthony, who work there now.

"It's happiness and fulfillment to see the family business grow," Antonietta said, Thomas translating her Italian. "I did my part. Hopefully, it will continue."

Vision and commitment

At its start, the restaurant was an opportunity for two brothers from the Mediterranean town of Monte di Procida, about 25 miles outside Napoli. Vincent was the first to come out to Hackettstown, while Antonio and Antonietta spent their first year in America commuting back and forth from Brooklyn, N.Y., Thomas said.

"He liked what he thought Hackettstown could become," Thomas said of his uncle's decided location.

"That's the same kind of vision I wish other people had in Hackettstown," said Town Councilman Joseph Bristow, who came to town with his wife in 1971 and has frequented the establishment ever since.

"If every entrepreneur in town had the same commitment to this town, this would be a better town," he said.

In 40 years, Hackettstown

MAMA'S IDEA

In celebration of 40 years of business, Mama's Pizza and Cafe Baci, 260 Mountain Ave. in Hackettstown, will be offering 40-cent pizza slices from Wednesday through Sunday, Aug. 22.

■ Co-owner Thomas Schiano said his mother, Antonietta, came up with the idea.

■ The anniversary celebration follows about two weeks of renovation, during which the restaurant was closed and a new room was added.

has gone through changes. Mountain Avenue has become more developed, though more recently many businesses have been struggling through a tough economy.

"It hurts," Thomas said. "I know a lot of these places are family businesses."

Mama's isn't the oldest business in Hackettstown. That distinction would go to Plate Jewelers, which has been around for about 150 years, Rucki said.

Others, like the Hackettstown Trading Post and Harper's Bagel and Bake, have also been around for decades.

One thing they all have in common is involvement in town functions, from assisting charities and nonprofit events to welcoming Centenary College students, Rucki said. Many long-term businesses have children in the local schools, or the owners may have attended themselves.

"That's the key to staying around for 40 years is getting into the fabric of the town," he said. "When you do that, the community is going to support you, keep you in business."

"Mama's has been a great asset to the town," said Mayor Michael Lavery. "That's a true Hackettstown establishment."

La famiglia

As much as some say Mama's helps characterize Hackettstown, it is equally important in defining the Schiano family.

It served as Thomas' education after he chose work over college. He spent his days talking to anyone who came in, asking them questions, going "to college behind the counter," he said.

It was the scene of celebration when Thomas' and Luigi's parents gained citizenship in 1991, and of sorrow when a former employee recently died, Thomas said.

All three generations are involved. Thomas handles the advertising and management, while Luigi takes care of the kitchen. Their sons assist in the operations, and occasionally require a phone call to Antonietta asking about a particular recipe.

In the garden out back, a grapevine from the late Antonio's garden is growing, its fruits used in his sons' dishes.

"I feel a sense that I was able to take my father's concept and take it to this level," Thomas said. "I think they would be proud, yet amazed."

The next generation is already looking forward to its turn.

"We're very proud we can keep something by the family going for so long," said Luigi's son, Anthony, as he pounded pizza dough. "Wouldn't have it any other way."

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B2 Sunday, August 15, 2010

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Above, Tom Schiano and his mother, Antonietta, talk about the history of the family business, Mama's Pizza and Cafe Baci in Hackettstown. Below, a lighted sign greets customers at the entrance to one of the dining areas.

