

Eatery thrives after 40 years

Guerrera family owns three Napoli pizzerias in Solano County

By RICH FREEDMAN/Times-Herald staff writer

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Anthony Guerrera thought long and hard and finally realized he

wouldn't really be happy unless he carried on the family tradition and joined his pops at Napoli Pizzeria.

Most parents would be ecstatic. Most parents, however, didn't fork over a lot of dough in sending a son to the University of California, Davis. Their geology major, they thought, must have had rocks in his head.

"My parents were like, 'But you went to college all those years. Are you sure?' " Guerrera recalled.

Yes, after six years of the business world, he had it. It was back to the ovens. And now, as the general manager of the popular pizza parlor on Tennessee Street, Guerrera runs with the baton - or is that a bread stick? - his father, Tony, began 40 years



Manager of Napoli Pizzeria, Anthony Guerrera, prepares pizza dough at the Tennessee Street eatery. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)



Mike Hammett, left, and Pete Tobola, from Computer Science Corporation, get ready to dig in as Napoli Pizzeria server DeEtta Platisha passes out lunch. CSC comes to Vallejo once a year and the company always stops off at Napoli for lunch. (Stacey J. Miller/Times-Herald)

ago.

"It finally hit me," Anthony said of his miserable years, "that all I was doing was coming to work and moving staff around as a classic middle manager. I thought, 'This is not very satisfying.' "

Guerrera was 31, and yearned for something far more meaningful. Basically, he stopped taking the time to smell the pepperoni.

After a year working weekends, Guerrera was convinced he could go back home.

"I made a decision. I wanted to come back

full-time and give it my all," he said.

It

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didn't take Guerrera much time back at the ovens to realize what his father knew 40 years ago.

"We have something here that very, very few places have," he said. "And Dad did a great job about the quality of the project."

It's not as if Anthony needed a crash course in making Italian food. He lived upstairs with his grandparents during summers and was always around after school.

"It always smelled good," Guerrera said.

He wasn't always talking about the food. Other than recovering from the Mare Island closure, it's been the sweet smell of success for the joint that churns out 150 pizzas or so

a day.

Of course, it could be that nostalgic feel of a business that appears only mildly tainted by modern trappings.

"People are often saying, 'I had my first date here,' or 'I remember coming here after high school football games,'" Guerrera said. "It amazes me. I guess it is a nostalgia thing. People just marvel that we're still here. It's a walk down memory lane."

Though the 38-year-old father of a 9-month-old girl runs the joint, 82-year-old papa Guerrera is a frequent - and welcomed - visitor and still owner.

"I call him almost every day," Anthony said. "Like today."

The front door broke, apparently, and Anthony needed dad to approve a \$325 check.

"My dad has a lot of sayings," Anthony noted. "Now, he has a very even-keeled personality. And he has 25 years on me. So one saying that comes to mind is, 'Son, roll your words in your mouth a few times before you let them out.' In other words, make sure you're saying the right thing."

Yes, Anthony shrugged, he has "lost it" with a dissatisfied customer.

"I've been embarrassed," he said. "But you go home and think about it. Usually, it's when you're 20 pizzas behind with three or four people pulling on you. You learn from it and try not to take it personally."

Guerrera is up front at the counter making pizzas and serving the customers. There is no hiding. If one isn't a people person before taking a job at Napoli, he either learns or leaves the business.

"It's learn as you go," he said. "It took me a while to learn."

Physically, the job is challenging. Guerrera's on his feet 12 hours a day. So he often works out in the gym before the dinner rush.

It's all nothing, he admitted, compared to his father's achievement.

"When I think of my dad coming to this country, not speaking the language, learning English and opening and operating a successful business, it's amazing to me," Anthony said.

Stress? Not if Anthony could help it.

"What I've learned that when I have the right staff in place, it's not stressful," he said.

Even handling 125 pizzas between 6 and 9 p.m. is a walk in the park.

"What makes it stressful is when someone calls in (sick)," he said. "That's when it gets stressful."

He can always borrow employees from his brother. Chris Guerrera owns Napoli in Benicia and brother Mike owns a Napoli in Vacaville. The other Guerrera brother, Dan, escaped the business and works for AAA in Arizona.

If there's one thing that can kill a business far worse than lack of employees, it's lack of business. And a diet fad "is the worst," Anthony said.

Take the no-carb avalanche that nearly buried purveyors of pasta and pizza.

"People were coming in wanting a 'pizza bowl,'" Guerrera said. "Where you put all the pizza toppings without crust in a bowl. And sandwiches with no bread."

Meanwhile, people would pack on all kinds of meats.

"You'll have a heart attack, but you'll be skinny," said Guerrera.

As for the "pregnancy pizza" that presumably induces child birth, don't believe it, he said.

Just a "new wives tale," Guerrera grinned.

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