

A few weeks ago, I met with my friend, Harry Roberts, who helps edit my monthly newsletter. Harry lives in Countryside, so we decided to meet at Johnny's Italian Restaurant for an early lunch. This was my first visit to Johnny's – but it certainly won't be my last. What a fantastic first impression! The ambiance is welcoming and charming. Johnny's staff is knowledgeable and friendly. Our server recommended the stuffed eggplant, and it was delicious! The prices are very reasonable. Do yourself a favor and visit this lovely restaurant at 2907 FL-590. You can visit their website: [johnnysitalian.com](http://johnnysitalian.com)

Founded in 1980 by John (Johnny) Nadeau, the restaurant was originally located on Drew St. just east of Hercules. Johnny moved to the 590 location in 1986.

For over 40 years John Nadeau has been serving Tampa Bay area families culinary delights and warm hospitality in his cozy restaurant. Recently, I had the opportunity to meet John Nadeau and ask a few questions about his life and business experiences here in Clearwater.

**Hi John,**

**Can you start by telling us a little bit about yourself? Are you a Clearwater native?**

I was born in Long Island NY and moved to Clearwater in 1973.

My mother was Italian, and my father was French. I'm the father of two sons, who make me very proud, and I'm married to the love of my life, my soul mate, Kristel. Kristel is a businesswoman, herself. She owns and operates Moda Milano Hair Salon in Northwood Plaza, Clearwater.

**So what made you want to enter the restaurant business or how did you get your start? Your training?**

I started working in Italian restaurants in New York when I was about 13. I started with washing dishes and doing food prep, but I really wanted to cook. I wanted to make pizzas. I loved the work. I loved being in the kitchen and all the frenzy of cooking and serving really good food. When we moved to FL in 1973 I continued working in Italian restaurants. There were really only two Italian restaurants I worked at. But one, Leo & Joe's was owned by my mentor and friend, Leo Portera. I really enjoyed working for Leo and learned so much from him. Even after 43 years, I stay in constant touch with Leo and his wife Lula. We share great wisdom and knowledge together and we help each other out as often as we can. After high school I went to college. I was interested in engineering, chemical engineering, or medicine. I really enjoy tinkering with things. I always have. I was working so hard going to school and working at restaurants. I paid for everything on my own; I was just a workaholic, but the pull of working in a restaurant was always there, and I decided I wanted to be in business for myself and opened my own Italian restaurant.

After college my mom, Mary Terrana, who, I gotta say was a huge influence in my life. I said "Mom, why don't we open a restaurant together?" My mom gave me (or should I say lent me!) \$20,000 she had saved (she was a waitress at Zorba's in Tarpon Springs in the 70's and 80's), and she and I opened my first restaurant, Johnny's Pizza Delite, located at 2097 Drew St. It was small; it only had about five tables and take-out. But Mom contributed a lot of the recipes. She baked a lot of the desserts. But my mom – she and I would fight like crazy, restaurant business can do that to you. We would challenge each other, you know? Oh, and that \$20,000 my mother invested in me; turns out I paid her back close to \$300,000 over the next 27 years until she passed. I have no regrets as I miss her so much to this day. She was a

legend. She had so many great sayings, some were old quotes and some originals. I remember her telling me:

You catch more flies with honey than vinegar.

Always cast your bread on the water (which means, be generous and don't expect anything in return)

Happiness is paying my bills

Never take on debt

But it was my mother's charisma, wisdom, and humility that so many adored.

In my early years in business, I was a 20-year-old kid. My mother would see dented cans on the shelf and ask me "Do you owe this vendor any money"? When I say no, she would ask "Then why would you accept this dented can", or why accept produce that is not perfect. Mom could be just as severe, at the same time being the kind generous soul that made her unique.

Mom taught me about balance in life. How to be frugal but not too frugal and never regret having to pay for services in life because the circulation of money to others is just as important.

If she ever heard anyone speaking bad about their own mother, she would quickly assert, "Don't ever speak ill of your mother, you have one mother".

Of course, there is so much more. I can only hope to be a fraction of what my mother was.

Anyway – we decided we needed more space, so I moved out here to Johnny's Italian Restaurant in 1986. And we've been here ever since.

### **Do your family members help with the business?**

I have two sons, Trevor and John Jr. and they do help tremendously. Trevor busses tables and John Jr. is a great presence at the To Go area, quite a high-pressure job. I do not know at this time if my son is a succession prospect. Many kids these days, maybe rightfully so, seem to not want to take over a family business. We'll see, that's one of the beautiful dramas in life. I try not to have expectations on people and when it works out, all the better!

### **To have a family restaurant survive and thrive for over 40 years is an amazing feat. Congratulations! To what do you owe your longevity?**

I love this business. I have no regrets about the business, no regrets about not finishing college. I love the independence. I love the people I work with. Some of my staff have been with me for decades. But the restaurant business can be brutal, a lot of moving parts. The financial reward can take a long time. For some, never. It took 10 years before I really started making just an OK wage. 43 years later I remain very active in the day to day running of the business. I am a work hard, play hard type of person. Always trying to change things up a bit, improve on things – remodeling, upgrading, or modernizing. It's fun. I awaken every morning with a simple goal; "Today, how can I make it better, more efficient while making everyone's day a little easier".

I don't focus on the financial reward of business ownership. Don't get me wrong, it's important. Restaurant ownership can stress you to no end. Financial reward helps to keep the balance and mindset as to "Why am I in this business"? But do a lot of things correct first, the reward will follow.

We strive to give a great value to our customers, and I believe they know this. Take care of your employees. We have a staff of 45 great people. Teach them the importance of fresh, high-quality food and service. I listen to the concerns of my staff. I keep the restaurant in great repair, nothing goes unfixed, we stay on top of everything.

### **What challenges are you facing now as a restaurant owner?**

Going back 2 and a half years ago, the challenges can be put chronologically this way: First COVID. Scary times for all. Massive layoffs, business closures, who knew what was next. I feel the government did a very good job with all the various assistance programs. At least from my perspective and I am very appreciative of that.

Then, the great resignation! Who saw this one coming and I still don't get it.

Now it's the inflation / supply chain issue. Inflation is by far a bigger issue than supply chain, at least for me. I have not raised prices enough to cover the enormous increases that we have endured. Rather I implement new systems for efficiency and execution. We are re-shopping main line vendors for price competition. Times are challenging and I stay on top of a vendor who tries to gouge us for no reason. The gouging is getting out of control in my opinion. It seems many can overcharge "just because" and try to get away with blaming it on inflation. I believe we have all seen this tactic.

With unemployment at historic lows, I am grateful for much of my staff that stay with us. They are like family; loyal and comfortable knowing that we always have a great 2-way relationship. Who knows what the near future holds? Recession and unemployment can become real, and my staff knows that we'll be OK. We've endured many bad times over the decades.

### **What do you find most rewarding?**

That's easy; making people happy. Every one of us has to eat. When folks leave Johnny's after a great meal and usually with a leftover for the next day, I see their satisfaction and in turn, I'm quite satisfied. Many of our customers go 3 generations deep. This is life work at play. Doesn't get much better than that.

### **Any memory that stands out in over 40 years of operation?**

So many over the decades. The engagements always stand out. There's something about Italian restaurants and Love in the air! The best is when we have couples come in to celebrate their engagement anniversary at Johnny's.

One story that is unforgettable but morbid I must add, happened about 10 years ago. It is story worth telling and it passes the "Too Soon" test. A very elderly woman was dining with her husband and two daughters. The woman suddenly suffered a massive heart attack. Her daughters carefully laid their mother on the floor and of course 911 was called. Paramedics arrived swiftly but were not able save the

woman. The memorable, if not funny part of this story, is that the husband never once left his seat to check on his wife. He kept eating his dinner and never stopped! Of course, it was very sad at the time and the reality is that there was nothing he could do, but it was memorable!

**Favorite dish to make?** Chicken Marsala and Chicken Piccata. There's something magically satisfying about watching raw chicken medallions transform along with the velvety sauce in a sauté pan in a matter of minutes!

**Most popular item on the menu?** Chicken Parmesan, Classic (meat) Lasagna and the Chicken Piccata / Marsala.

**I am so excited to learn about the "green" initiatives you've taken at Johnny's. Can you tell me a little about the solar on your roof and the EV charger you had installed? Actually – you told me you installed the solar panels yourself!**

**How many panels – or system size:** 135 panels, 375 watt each. Approx. 50,000-watt system.

**Cost:** About \$150K

**Payback:** 8 Years

**Savings:** 1,100.00 per month

**Why did you do it?**

First and foremost, to save energy for the planet. Second, with federal tax credits getting ready to expire several years ago I was even more incentivized.

I can see electric use going down with the proliferation of LED lighting, energy efficient appliances and air conditioning. But the electric cost to the consumer is rising because utility companies charge customers at a greater rate on excess electric use over 1000 kwh per month. A penalty of sort. An incentive to try and use less. I believe we all have the moral obligation to do our part for energy reduction. I often hear of people complaining about huge electric bills these days. But 1<sup>st</sup>., are you keeping your house too cold, keeping you're A/C filters and coils clean, using an intelligent thermostat, 100% LED lighting, energy efficient pool pump, running washer, dryer and dish machine not at proper capacity; the list goes on.

**What's your relationship with the City of Clearwater or any organizations that you might interact with?**

I feel that my relationship with the City is as best as it's ever been. I still struggle a bit with certain codes but that's life in the big city! It seems that any time I have to interact with the City, it is always cordial, friendly and understanding.

**What can the City do to help you be successful or make your life easier as a small business owner?**

Well, I'll tell you – the city was a great help when Covid hit. I appreciated being able to extend some dining outdoors. People like that. And I was able to take advantage of federal government programs such as PPP, ERC (Employee Retention Credit) and local grants from the City of Clearwater and Pinellas County. It was very well orchestrated, needed and appreciated.

Today, what I would tell the city is just to treat all businesses fairly and equally. Be sure the playing field is level. When it comes to signage or parking or whatever, just be sure you treat everyone the same – no special treatment.

**Are you planning to retire, hand over the reins?** Well, I'm looking for a 25% equity partner if anyone is interested. Haha. But I don't have definite plans right now.

**What is your typical daily routine?**

I tackle what seems to be an endless to-do list of projects, every day. I create tasks for the management and oversee their progress. I watch closely the routines of many of my workers, then try to implement better procedures if I can. Basically, I fix stuff and solve problems!

**What do you enjoy doing in your free time?** I like to travel. Kristel and I like to go to Costa Rica at least 4 times a year, that's where she's from. We enjoy visiting her family and we always do a different Costa Rica side trip. It's such a beautiful diverse country. Costa Rica accounts for only 0.03 percent of the earth's surface. However, it contains nearly 6 percent of the world's biodiversity.

**Anything else you'd like people to know about Johnny's Italian Restaurant?**

If you haven't been to Johnny's yet, what are you waiting for?

**Do you have a particular quote or motto you like to live by?**

I'm going to take a risk here because my favorite motto is probably considered inappropriate and cynical. It is a motto from W.C. Fields, but I use my own interpretation of it; I apply it to many large corporations in this country. Not all, but many for a litany of reasons through my short life. Ready?

***"You can never be wrong doing the right thing."***

**Thank you so much for taking the time to share your story with me and my readers, Johnny. I wish you continued success.**