



THE COMEBACK KINGS

WHEN BRUNO'S LITTLE ITALY CLOSED ITS DOORS IN 2011, LEGIONS OF LOYAL FANS BEGGED FOR AN ENCORE. TWO YEARS LATER, WITH A NEW LOCATION AND THE SAME STORIED MENU, VINCE AND GIO BRUNO ARE HAPPY TO DELIVER

BY ERIC FRANCIS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY ARSHIA KHAN

WHEN YOU SHUT DOWN A FAMILY-OWNED restaurant that's been around for more than six decades, people tend to ask questions—namely, “When are you going to open it again?” ¶ “Every day [I get that],” says Vince Bruno, smiling wryly. “I’ve been the face of Bruno’s about 25 years. No lie. I get stopped all the time and asked. I would say on a daily basis.” ¶ “Or sometimes they’re a little belligerent and ask, ‘Where the hell is my pizza?’” his brother Gio says with a laugh, and Vince’s smile gets a little bigger.

VINCENZO GENNARO NICOLO BRUNO, Giovanni Bruno and their brother, James Earnest Bruno (who goes by Jay) are the local scions of the late restaurateur Vincenzo “Jimmy” Bruno. (They have half-siblings, too, on both their father’s and mother’s sides, spread as far away as Connecticut.) All three brothers worked in the restaurant at some point in their lives, and today they’ve come back together so they can re-create it in a way that their father would immediately recognize.

That namesake business—known over the years as Little Italy Cafe, Bruno’s Little Italy or simply Bruno’s—introduced generations of Arkansans to Neapolitan cuisine nirvana. And now, nearly two years after closing the doors on Bruno’s Bowman Curve location, the brothers have hung the family’s

shingle out once again and thrown open the doors to the lovers of Italian food in and around central Arkansas.

To paraphrase Roger Daltry: Meet the new Bruno’s, same as the old Bruno’s.

There’s plenty to discuss, but right off the bat, Vince and Gio want folks to know the pizza will be the same. So will the toasted ravioli, the spaghetti carbonara, the chicken piccata. They’ll be making sausage in-house from their father’s recipe, as well as his signature desserts like zabaglione (eggs, sugar and marsala or amaretto, whipped in a copper bowl, then poured over ladyfingers). Spumoni will be brought in from New Orleans, and Vince will be making cheesecake from scratch, again using Jimmy Bruno’s family recipe.

Some of that food will be turned out by someone who “might as well be a Bruno,” says Vince: Harold Woodbury, who started making pasta by hand for Bruno’s in 1968 and kept doing so for 43 years. Currently the manager of the Breezes cafeteria at Baptist Health Medical Center in Little Rock, Woodbury will work around that job to make pasta and train Gio’s chef son Dominic, who is returning to Arkansas to work in the family kitchen, just as cooks who learned their skills from Jimmy Bruno passed along their knowledge to Woodbury.

Gio Bruno (left) with brother Vince Bruno



GOOD TASTE

“He’s incredible. He’s like a machine,” says Vince, a tall, dark-haired guy who pauses to think before he speaks. “The guy can make handmade toasted raviolis, and they all look the same. He’s basically a Bruno brother, for all purposes.”

Oldest brother Jay will be involved via his day job as a wine salesman with Moon Distributors of Arkansas. “He’s the one who knows everything

The old celebrity photographs and memorabilia will line the walls, and the music in the dining room will be the same as Jimmy Bruno used to play from a stack of records, often plugging in a microphone so he could sing along in the dining room with his Billy Eckstine baritone.

The location will be brand new—in downtown Little Rock at 310 Main St.—but the brothers are confident that anyone who ate at one of the

the 1940s and received some of his training at Camp Robinson in North Little Rock. Later, with some Army buddies, he moved to Chicago and started that city’s first pizzeria, under the L train on Wabash Avenue. But after about a year, the Chicago Syndicate moved in wanting protection money, and that was the last straw for Jimmy.

“My dad hated Chicago,” says Gio. “He said the mob there was worse than New York because they owned the food services and insisted you buy certain products regardless of whether you wanted them.”

Jimmy got out of the situation unscathed, family lore says, because he was able to drop the name of a half-brother who was with the Mafia. But Jimmy wanted to get out of town, too. A Northerner who had embraced the South during his Camp Robinson days, he went to his bank and told them to transfer his funds to Union National Bank in Little Rock. He moved back and opened his first restaurant in North Little Rock’s blue-collar Levy neighborhood in 1947. It was successful enough that less than two years later, he relocated to Roosevelt Road in Little Rock, and in 1978 moved again to Old Forge Road on the city’s west side.

After Jimmy Bruno died in 1984, his wife, Ernestine, ran the restaurant for a few years until it closed in 1987. But the next year it opened again on Bowman Road with Vince running the kitchen, an incarnation that lasted almost 25 years. Vince says the Bowman Bruno’s closed due to a combination of factors, the most significant of which was the down economy. They were still doing “pretty decent business,” he says, but it was declining. In fact, the brothers are quick to point out, restaurants in that vicinity all seemed to be having kind of a rough time.

“As you can see, the Buffalo Grill closed a few [weeks] ago. Faded Rose closed over there. Right across Markham, The Villa, which was the second-oldest Italian restaurant after us, closed,” says Vince.

But it wasn’t long after the doors were shut that the brothers started thinking about opening up again, and this time doing it without any outside partners who, even when they have the best intentions, may want to compromise on things like the quality of ingredients in order to shift a few more dollars into the profit column. Kin, though, would understand that while that might make economic sense, it wouldn’t be true to the spirit of the Brunos.

“It has been my prayer for many years for it to come back to the family,” says Vince, “and that prayer has been answered by Gio. I wanted to start up again, and Gio called up and said, ‘Hey, why don’t we do this together?’ I said, ‘That’s awesome.’”

For his part, Gio was ready to retire from Blue Cross of Arkansas, where he worked as an art



“WHEN SOMEONE COMES IN, I WANT THEM TO BE ABLE TO SAY, ‘THIS IS EXACTLY LIKE I REMEMBER IT. IT’S JUST AS GOOD.’”

about wine,” says Gio. And there hasn’t been any trouble tracking down past employees who might want in on the new venture.

“Oh my God,” says Gio, who with his long, silvering hair and more animated conversational style is a contrast to his younger brother. “Everybody that ever worked at Bruno’s from my birth is asking me for a job.”

They’ve found china that is an almost perfect match for the old plates, and the same glasses that were used before. There will be booths draped in burgundy curtains; Gio is still picking out the fabric but says it will be “shiny and heavy.”

restaurant’s previous homes will recognize the place as Bruno’s, through and through.

“I am being meticulous about this,” says Gio. “I want this to be a return of the original Bruno’s.”

As for those origins, the family’s roots stretch back to the old country—to Naples, Italy, from whence Jimmy Bruno’s mother and father emigrated to New York City around 1907. The family owned a grocery store in the Bronx and eventually started what Jimmy Bruno always said was the first pizzeria in the United States.

“We should’ve patented it,” Gio jokes.

Jimmy Bruno served in the U.S. Army in

director, and he felt the opportunity was ripe for reviving the restaurant.

“We spent all of 2012 scoping out real estate,” Gio says. Their search was aided by Moses-Tucker Real Estate (principals Jimmy Moses and Rett Tucker were Bruno’s regulars), which eventually suggested one of their own buildings downtown at 310 Main St. “It turned out perfect.”

Once open, the restaurant will have 99 seats and will be open for lunch and dinner. Gio expects there to be a brisk take-home dinner business, too, and because parking is tight around the new location, they are experimenting with setting aside an early hour in the evening just for customers to come by and pick up their orders, before the dinner rush starts. As for the menu, with such a large collection of traditional Bruno’s dishes, they’re probably going to rotate on and off some to make sure that everyone’s favorite can be had at some point in the week.

“When someone comes in, I want them to be able to say, ‘This is exactly like I remember it. It’s just as good,’” says Vince.

But Vince will also give Gio’s son Dominic a chance to demonstrate the skills he’s been honing as a chef at restaurants in Fort Collins, Colo., by having him turn out unique dishes as weekly specials.

This opportunity will also give Vince the satisfaction of making the old family recipes again, some of which originated with his grandparents and are more than a century old. Recipes, oddly enough, that weren’t the food the Bruno boys grew up eating, at least not at home.

“My dad wouldn’t cook at home. He really didn’t do a lot of the same stuff he did at the restaurant,” Vince recalls. “My mother cooked a lot of Southern food ... stuff like chicken-fried steak, pork chops.”

For his own part, Vince hasn’t fallen back on those family recipes very often himself.

“A couple or three times I have actually made some of the meat sauce and marinara sauce and chicken Parmesan for friends,” he says. “It was very fun, and I absolutely loved doing it. I was really excited not only because I was feeding friends, but I wanted to eat it myself. I was craving it again, and I am craving it again. Oh, yes.”

Being able to resurrect the family business now is something the Brunos clearly relish. And the fact that they’ve got a legacy driving the decision, and not merely a profit motive, makes it even more palatable.

“Probably the best thing about this situation for me is I have no ambitions to make more than I made as an art director,” says Gio. “I’m not trying to get rich. I’m going back into it to help my family.”

“In a nutshell,” says Vince, “this whole thing is not about making a living. It’s about making Little Rock happy again with Bruno’s.” **AL**

