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Number 5

Celebrating Local Foods of the Garden State, Season by Season

Summer 2008

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EDIBLE TRADITION

BY PATRICIA KLINDIENST

JERSEY DINER

A venerable Garden State tradition is grounded in family, diversity, community—and good, fresh food.

My mother's Italian-American family fed the people of Atlantic Highlands for more than 75 years, beginning with the day in 1924 when my grandfather, Antonio Natale, who came from Naples in 1907 and married my immigrant grandmother, Virginia Delia Migliaccio, put a large sign in front of the family's big summer house at 81 Bay Avenue. "For a Good Dinner When at Atlantic Highlands Stop at Antonio Natalie's restaurant. Will open May 1st 1924," it read, with a large arrow pointing to the entrance. The sign painter got the name wrong, but my grandfather never bothered to have it corrected. Later, he had a tall RESTAURANT sign erected on the roof (see photo). You could see it from the Ferris wheel in the amusement park that used to be right across the street on the beach.

Between the legitimate business of cooking in their Hoboken restaurant and the shadier business of bootlegging, wildly popular during Prohibition, the Natales had made enough money to move the entire family to the beautiful old wooden house on Bay Avenue every summer. We have old photos of the generations posing happily in the big yard, with its flowerbeds here and there on the lawn and in back, the grape vines, the vegetable garden, and the tall sunflowers against the fence. Then one day, in a matter of hours, they lost it all. In 1929, just before the stock market crashed and America was plunged into the Great Depression, the Hoboken restaurant caught fire and the family's business and home burnt to the ground. They had no fire insurance; the buildings were looted. They all had to move to the unheated summer house in Atlantic Highlands.

The work of twenty years undone, my grandfather and Uncle Joey got up one day and walked across the Highlands Bridge to the gates of Fort Hancock, where they got permission from the commanding officer to open a concession for the soldiers. That little restaurant, once housed in the basement of Bldg. 53, helped the family rebuild their lives. My mother, Esther Natale, and all her siblings worked there in the early 1930s. Joey helped my grandfather cook (see photo) while Esther, Millie, and Violet waited on the soldiers. That's how my father, Edward Klindienst, a Master Gunner, met my mother. She was the dark-eyed, dark-haired beauty who waited on him. He was the GI who spoke to her politely and read a thick volume of Spinoza at the counter, sipping coffee.

After the war, it was only Uncle Joey who stayed in the food business. In the '50s he owned Natale's Diner on Rte. 36 for a few years. But the diner I remember, the one that defines "diner" for me—the longest lived and best known, the magnet that drew our family to-

gether, the place where we were kin, not customers, and could spin around on the robin's egg blue stools along the white counter, where we were greeted with hugs and kisses and fed delicious soup, dark rich coffee and coffeecake, or best of all, Anthony's rice pudding, and were never allowed to pay for anything—that was the White Crystal Diner. Uncle Joey and his wife Carmella, my Aunt Molly, opened it in 1960. It stood at 20 Center Avenue for forty years.

For a time, all four of their children worked there: Virginia, Anthony, Dominic, and Joe. Later, it was just Joey and Molly, Ginny and Anthony, until Ginny left. After Uncle Joey's heart gave out, right there at the counter, at the end of one all-night shift in 1975—my sister remembers how the flowers filled two rooms at the funeral parlor, and how sad it was for the long procession of cars to pass the diner with a CLOSED sign in the window and a mourning wreath on the door—then my cousin Anthony, who'd worked alongside his father for decades, took over. Nicknamed "Moose" by loyal customers, Anthony kept alive a tradition of home cooking with real, fresh food that not only reflected our Neapolitan heritage, but his memories of eating from Grandpop and Grandma Natale's garden. The White Crystal stood for an idea of a small, local business where the owner knew everyone by name and nobody had to order anything—Anthony and Molly knew what they wanted and placed it before them. Theirs was a classic New Jersey diner, and when it finally closed a few years ago, the town mourned publicly, with editorials in the local paper under a cartoon showing a sad group of customers gathered on the sidewalk waving goodbye as the diner sprouts wings and rises up to fly away. "Last week, the White Crystal Diner in Atlantic Highlands, closed its doors during an emotional goodbye to its long-time customers," Jim Purcell wrote in the *Herald*. "I do not believe we should allow the passing of the White Crystal to go without mourning it a little. American industry did not begin with IBM, Shell, Exxon or Merck—it began with the American small business owner, waking up in the dark and returning home long after the sun had set.... [They] were our neighbors, they lived right next door and we knew them from school.... the Natales and their diner are not something we will again see," he wrote in closing.





The newspaper was not the only public bidding of farewell to my cousin Anthony and my Aunt Molly, then 95, and thanking them for a lifetime of serving good food. The mayor, Mike Harmon, composed a RESOLUTION OF THE BOROUGH OF ATLANTIC HIGHLANDS: HONORING THE NATALE FAMILY. It closes like this:

WHEREAS, we regret that the White Crystal Diner that

has honored Atlantic Highlands will be here no more, but we rejoice that Tony Natale and Molly Natale will enjoy a well-deserved rest,

NOW THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by the Mayor and Council of Atlantic Highlands that the Natale family be honored for having provided so many meals and so much opinion for so many years, and for bringing so much support, life and energy to Atlantic Highlands.

My mother would have loved it.

I was pretty far along in life before I realized that not everybody had a diner—and a priest—in the family. Growing up on West Highland Avenue, just two blocks from Grandpop Natale's house, we were surrounded by a huge network of kin and knew the pleasures of having one of each. Our private priest was Uncle Eugene, Molly's little brother, a Franciscan, who once said Christmas mass on my cousin Virginia's ironing board, when his father, Mr. Pescatore, was too sick to go to church at St. Agnes. We all received communion in the living room, then squeezed into Ginny's tiny dining room for Molly's stuffed artichokes followed by homemade cannelloni with marinara sauce. Eating together was our eighth sacrament. Food was a form of deep cultural memory. For the first generation, it was the strongest link to a time and a place they would never see again. Gathering around the table to eat the foods of our ancestors bound us all together in a communion for which my generation had few words. Like the air that sustains us—inside and outside us at once, the invisible, enveloping medium we move through without thinking—our ethnic food, our feasts, where voices rose in a deafening crescendo to match the steep pitch of our volatile emotions, were simply who we were.

Homegrown and homemade food lost respect after World War II, when American farming was industrialized, and the gigantic powers of war technology were unleashed on the land. This was also a time

when ethnic Americans endured shameful measures to force them to assimilate. The stories in my book echo with the pain of their losses. The garden, then, became a sacred refuge where families who stopped teaching their children their native tongue to save them from public humiliation and physical punishment in school grew the food that defined them. Long after most Americans stopped planting their Victory gardens and began enjoying the instant gratification of fast food, ethnic Americans continued to grow and eat the foods of their ancestors, innovating as they adapted to changing conditions. A priceless heritage, these cuisines were lovingly passed on in family kitchens. There were no recipes—you learned by watching and helping. It's been my work for several years now to point out that millions of Americans have kept their traditional foodways alive, sometimes in secret, passing on a cultural legacy our larger culture only now recognizes as a real form of knowledge, so valuable and so threatened that an entire movement has sprung up to make those who grow, harvest and prepare real fresh, local food visible once again.

My mother and father are gone; Uncle Joey and Grandpop Natale and Virginia died years ago now. The Diner is gone, too. Though the building is slated for a new life in Springfield, Massachusetts, where it will serve a new ethnic enclave, the days of Our Diner, the family diner, the Natale Diner, are over. In February of 1997 the *Asbury Park Press* ran a feature by Harriet Ryan with the title, "Diner's Waning Days." "Basically, I've served the working man my whole life," Anthony told

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