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Success of La Borgata is no surprise

BYLINE: BILL CHURCH BJ contributor

If you check out the track record of Dominic and Rosalia DiFede, it should come as no surprise that their Italian restaurant and pizzeria, La Borgata in Palm City, has lines out the door, even in the normally slow summer season.

It's that way when the DiFedes take over a new location, usually somewhat rundown, and turn it around.

La Borgata is approaching its second anniversary in November. Business was good almost from the beginning. Revenues doubled this past winter season over the first season, and the second summer just ending has been up 30 percent from the first, according to Rosalie.

That's not a surprise to a couple who seven years ago sold their restaurant "Bellini's" in Woodbridge, N.J., to "semi-retire" to Florida. They never joined the ranks of the idle.

The DiFedes owned and ran Bellini's from 1993 to 2000. It was the fulfillment of a dream for Rosalia, whose goal was always a 12-table restaurant and pizzeria. It grew far beyond that. Within four months, they had a crew of four. They then knocked out a wall, took over the former Chinese restaurant next door, added tables and booths, and still had customers waiting.

The first week that Bellini's was open, it grossed \$3,000, the DeFedes said. When they sold it, the restaurant was grossing \$1.2 million, seated 114 and employed 22 people.

The couple had a 147-seat restaurant in Freehold, N.J., which they also sold in 2000.

Dominic, 47, and Rosalia, 44, have been married for 27 years. Both are natives of Palermo, Sicily, where Dominic's parents rented from Rosalia's parents and lived upstairs.

Rosalia's parents came to New York in 1972 and her dad bought a Brooklyn pizzeria. They continued to visit Palermo on vacations. Through those visits, Dominic and Rosalia became better acquainted, began writing daily letters across the oceans and became engaged in 1979. Dominic moved to America that year and he and Rosalia went to work for her Dad, learning the pizza business.

In 1986, they borrowed money to buy their first pizzeria and trattoria in Neptune, N.J., and then another in nearby Edison. Both were built with hard work.

"For seven years, we worked seven days a week from 10 a.m. to midnight," Dominic recalled.

In 1993, Bellini's opened and for the next five years neither one had a day off.

"We believe that what you put in you get out, so we work hard," Rosalie said.

Then, as now, Dominic is the pizza creator.

"I love to make pizza," he said. "It's a sport. I did the kitchen at Bellini's several nights a week and I didn't like it."

Rosalia cracks the whip in the kitchen and the restaurant. She learned to cook from her mother and cook books.

"It's a passion, it's in the blood," Rosalia said. "Even now, I wake up in the middle of the night with ideas for the restaurant."

A mutual friend in Port St. Lucie lured the DiFedes to the Treasure Coast, where they fell in love with Palm City. From 2000 to 2005, Dominic owned pizzerias in Port St. Lucie and Vero Beach. He even spent time in the unfamiliar role of employee. Rosalia worked as a country club server and an administrative assistant.

For several years, they had their eye on the Fireside Grill, a bar and sandwich shop on Mapp Road. When it became available, they snapped it up, spent four months refurbishing and painting, and opened in November 2005 as La Borgata. It means "the neighborhood" in Italian.

Remembering their success in New Jersey, Dominic and Rosalia hired their cook from Bellini's, moving him and his family here. They also took on a partner, Anthony Cortichia, who had learned how to make pizza while working for Dominic at his Vero Beach location. Both men received their kitchen education from Rosalia.

"This dream of mine came to fruition," Rosalie said. "We planned a grand opening but it never came together so we just opened the door."

Aside from a few weeks of radio ads to promote the opening, the couple relied on word of mouth to build traffic.

The DiFedes estimate 60 percent of their revenues comes from the 74-seat restaurant and 40 percent from the pizzeria.

Running LaBorgata is truly a family affair. In addition to Dominic and Rosalia, daughters Francesca, 23, and Rita, 24, handle many management chores. Francesca's interests lean more toward the dining room side while Rita prefers the pizza business.

Both started by helping out at their grandparents' New York pizzeria when they were small. When they grew older, Francesca studied fashion design and Rita the beauty business. Neither was able to shake the lure of the restaurant business.

"I went to school to get out of this business, but I love it," Francesca said. "I love working with my parents. We've done this for so many years that we want to be together."

Also on board are Francesca's fiancée, Gianluca DiFede (no relation), and cousin, Francesca Sanfratello. Even a younger brother, 11-year-old Matthew, helps out.

They work six days so that a family member is always on duty. Dominic and Rosalia add that the restaurant is blessed with eight very good employees.

They also have loyal patrons, Rosalia said. LaBorgata takes reservations as a service to them.

Some will also become travel buddies. At their urging, Rosalia plans to lead them on a tour of the family homeland in Sicily.

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