

A Dash of Drama in the Pizza World

By

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November 29, 2011



Eric Michael Johnson for The New York Times

The owner of Grimaldi's, the famed Brooklyn pizzeria near the Brooklyn Bridge, is moving to a new spot nearby after a dispute with the landlord.

A heady perfume of cheese, tomatoes and crispy coal-fired crust wafts onto the sidewalk of Old Fulton Street, intoxicating enough to cause tourists to snap pictures and queue in stomach-growling anticipation.

But few know the gritty, gooey story behind Grimaldi's Pizzeria, the internationally recognized Brooklyn hot spot at the center of a changing season in the New York pizza world.

Its current owner, Frank Ciolli, after a contentious relationship with the landlord, had been scheduled to move the pizzeria on Tuesday to a corner property a few doors away, by the Brooklyn Bridge.

But the opening of the new Grimaldi's was postponed as the Ciolli family dealt with a dispute with New York City over its oven and the sudden death of Mr. Ciolli's youngest son.

In place of Grimaldi's on Old Fulton will soon be a new pizza shop, yet one with history, as Patsy and Carol Grimaldi return to the storefront they left when they sold the business to Mr. Ciolli in 1998 after eight years there.

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This is not an old-fashioned New York pizza war. Rather, it is a pizza opera, bubbling with love, loss, tragedy and legal scuffles, all fired in a 700-degree-plus inferno and topped, of course, with a little fresh basil.

Toss in other recent episodes — Di Fara Pizza in Brooklyn reopened to long lines after being shuttered for a week by the health department, and the original Ray's Pizza in Little Italy closed after a celebrated run — and it has been a challenging time for traditional pie makers in the city.

Not that it was easy to tell outside Grimaldi's on Old Fulton on Monday as tourists waited on a balmy afternoon. "We saw the queue," said Sioban Stevenson, 26, from London, "and thought it must be good."

The lease for the Grimaldi's on Old Fulton expires Wednesday, and the new space, at 1 Front Street, shows no immediate sign of being close to opening.

Last Wednesday, the architectural firm for Frank Ciolli's new pizzeria quit because Mr. Ciolli had installed a coal oven rather than the gas-coal combination that had been agreed on, said Robert M. Scarano Jr., the president of the firm, Scarano Architect. (Mr. Scarano was prohibited in 2010 from filing any plans with the Buildings Department because of repeated violations.) The city then ordered all work at the new site stopped.

Jennifer Gilbert, a spokeswoman for the Buildings Department, said that Fire Department and environmental regulations restricted new coal ovens, and that Mr. Ciolli needed special approval. Because the coal oven had already been installed, the department issued an order Friday to vacate the property.

Ms. Gilbert said her department had suggested that Mr. Ciolli compromise by having a gas-powered oven, with coal for flavor, but Joseph Ciolli, the chief executive of Grimaldi's, said his company had these same coal brick ovens in its other locations in Manhattan and across the country.

"We have all intentions to abide by all city regulations in this new location as well as any future Grimaldi's Pizzeria," he said. "Grimaldi's is and always will be a coal brick oven pizzeria."

It is not clear when the Ciollis will resolve the issues with the Buildings Department. This week, instead, the family has been grieving for Russell Ciolli, 39, who died last week after exercising. He owned the Grimaldi's Pizzeria in Garden City, N.Y.

"Grimaldi's Pizzeria has been and will always be a business about family, not just pizza," Joseph Ciolli, 42, Russell's older brother, said in an e-mail after the funeral on Monday.

The Ciollis lost their lease for 19 Old Fulton Street after protracted battles with the landlord, Dorothy Waxman. In the summer of 2010, Ms. Waxman took Frank Ciolli to court over unpaid rent and water bills, threatening to terminate the lease. (She took him to court in 2007, too.)

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A judge ordered Mr. Ciolli to pay, which he did. He then countersued, claiming that the Waxman family was trying to ruin his business, said Dr. Mark Waxman, a New Jersey gastroenterologist who handles the financial and legal affairs of his mother, Dorothy, who is 88 and lives in an assisted-living facility.

Meanwhile, Mr. Grimaldi, 80, and his wife, 73, had been itching to return to business in New York, looking for the right rent. Ms. Grimaldi, dismayed over seeing the Grimaldi name negatively portrayed in reports, eventually asked the Waxmans about the lease.

Dr. Waxman, who said he had had nearly a dozen offers from prospective tenants, was thrilled to welcome the Grimaldis back. He said if the Ciolli family “had fulfilled their obligations, we would have had no reason to look for new tenants.”

In 1990, the Grimaldis were considered pioneers in the Dumbo neighborhood; now it is invigorated by the water taxi and ferry. The new restaurant will be called Juliana’s, named for Mr. Grimaldi’s mother, and is expected to open after a few months of renovations.

“A little competition is healthy,” Ms. Grimaldi said of Mr. Ciolli’s restaurant. There is a third, less heralded pizza restaurant around the corner on Water Street, Ignazio’s. “With the amount of people coming here, we need three pizza places,” said Ignazio’s owner, Louis Salvatore Termini, 63.

He follows Grimaldi’s rules: no slices and no credit cards. But he does offer delivery.

He is pleased that the Grimaldis are returning. “I know he was not happy about what was happening and he felt he sold it for too little,” Mr. Termini said. “This is justice coming into play.”

In New York, pizza controversy cuts deeper than red sauce and red tape. Di Fara, the highly rated pizza restaurant in Midwood, was forced to close for a week this month after receiving 67 violations from the health department, including citations for mouse droppings. It was the second time it was shut for violations.

An employee was supposed to clean on the morning of the spot inspection, but the night before, he was hospitalized after a reaction to chemotherapy, said Margaret Miele, whose father, Domenico de Marco, owns Di Fara. The worker is her teenage nephew, and the family rushed to his side.

“There’s a whole family behind these businesses,” Ms. Miele said. “We don’t just have the joy of people loving our pizza. We have tragedies. That’s what people don’t see.”