

The Spot: Gullifty's in Rosemont



Jason (left) and Gene Johnson at Gullifty's in Rosemont. DANYA HENNINGER

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Posted: Monday, August 3, 2015, 11:18 AM

We always hear about the shiny, new food companies. The Spot is a series about the Philadelphia area's more established establishments and the people behind them.

In 1975, when Gene Johnson and his business partner Andy Zangrilli opened Gullifty's on Lancaster Avenue in Rosemont, it was ahead of its time. Nowadays, casual, family-friendly restaurants with liquor licenses are probably the most popular style of dining in the U.S. - as evidenced by the proliferation of chains like TGI Friday's, Houlihan's and Applebee's. But 40 years ago, it was a novel idea.

It was also an immediately popular one. Even though the partners did almost nothing to promote the restaurant's launch, it was busy from day one. Almost too busy: Johnson opened the doors at 5 p.m. and promptly closed them one hour later - he was exhausted, and things in the kitchen went haywire. Nevertheless, the doors reopened the very next day at 11 a.m.; lunch went swimmingly, and Gullifty's became a Main Line staple.

After a decade and a half, Johnson bought out his partner, whom he'd met and worked for while he was obtaining undergrad and graduate degrees from Penn State. (Zangrilli still owns several restaurants in State College.) With full ownership, Johnson threw himself into the business, overseeing a series of

expansions, turning what originated as a small, 3,300-square-foot spot into a 200-plus-seat restaurant with several dining rooms and an outdoor beer garden.

The food and drink served also got several upgrades along the way, although much of it was scratch-made from the very beginning.

In 1997, Gullifty's became one of the first restaurants in the area to embrace craft beer. Johnson expanded his beer list to 120 bottles, and added taps so he could offer 18 different brews on draft. In 2010, the restaurant began making its own ice cream, which comes in rotating flavors like strawberry-brownie and coffee-Oreo, and is also used in an unbeatable Guinness milkshake.

A couple of years ago, Gene, 69, brought on his son Jason, 37, as partner and general manager. An energetic young man who was pegged as Gene's likely successor as early as third grade, Jason has initiated improvements at the Rosemont Square restaurant. He's a critic of genetically modified foods, and is doing everything he can to rid the menu of GMO ingredients. He's also a firm believer in the importance of face-to-face communication, and takes pleasure in the fact that restaurant like his are one of the last remaining physical gathering places for an increasingly digitally connected society.

Gene's pride in his son's leadership is evident when he listens to Jason expound on his beliefs and retell stories about learning the biz as he was growing up. Jason is also very obviously proud of his dad, whom he's been calling his personal hero since he was just a little kid.

What made you want to go into the restaurant business, Gene?

Working at Mack & Manco's, in Ocean City, N.J. I worked there summers from when I was 19 all through college and graduate school. I saw how much money they were making, and thought to myself, "These people aren't that bright - if they can make money doing this, I can make money doing this." Little did I know how they were geniuses, in reality. They had a very simple operation, but it ran incredibly smoothly. They made it look simple.

Did you go to school for restaurant management?

I got a degree in marketing. But when I was at Penn State, I met Andy Zangrilli, who owned five restaurants in State College. I started working for him with the intention that we would eventually open a spot together. All his places were different - a Neapolitan-style pizza place, a Sicilian-style pizza place, a hoagie shop, an Italian restaurant and a deli. We took items from each of those menus and combined it into one for our new restaurant.

How'd you come up with the name?

Andy was talking to someone who worked for him, and she says, "That's nifty gullifty!" He called me up and said, "I've got the name!" I wasn't crazy about it, but since he put the money up, whatever he said, went. We had no idea where it came from. We got all these phone books from places like London and Dublin, to see if we could find the name. But it just didn't exist. So we came up with a spelling - we just picked the one that looked the best.

When did you find out where it came from?

It was in the first couple of years. A customer said something about hearing it on Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood. And we had other customers that I knew were good friends with Fred Rogers, so I asked them about it, and they wrote him a letter to ask. He wrote a letter in response, which we still have, saying, "Yes, that's what the owl says - nifty galifty!" (He spelled it differently.) He said he was thrilled someone would use his word. Today people would probably sue you instead.

Why this location?

Andy had some good friends down here, and thought it would be a good place. It wasn't the only place we looked, though - we went to Boston, Cambridge, Virginia Beach, the Jersey Shore. But we settled here. A few developers were building this mall - the site used to be a lumber yard.

And you were the anchor restaurant?

The only restaurant. We built it in around 3 months. I was the general contractor. I was just 29 and had never done anything like this before. We opened on June 11, 1975 - a Wednesday - because that was the day we got our liquor license. People were coming through the doors as we were putting liquor on the shelves. We opened at 5 o'clock. We closed at 6. I had been up for at least 48 hours, and I was the primary chef. Things went so badly in the kitchen that everyone who was lucky enough to get food, got it for free. Then we closed and I went to bed. We probably should have waited another week.

How did people know you were opening; did you do a lot of promotion?

Almost none. You didn't really have to promote, in those days. There wasn't anything like us. There was no Bennigan's, no Houlihan's, no Friday's, no restaurants of that style - basically, a family-style restaurant with a liquor license. The only pre-opening publicity we did was had a great big sign made and hitched to a trailer that pulled it around the community. At the time, our logo was a cherub wearing a sash that said "Gullifty's." One of the mall owners called us up, worried it wasn't "appropriate for the area." He said, "Does it have any clothes on it?" It was a cherub!

Is this restaurant related to the Gullifty's in Camp Hill?

We're not officially affiliated - it's owned by the guy who was my original partner here, Andy [Zangrilli]. At one point, there were six Gullifty's operating. In 1980, we opened a second location in Elkins Park. We closed it in 1990, when I bought Andy out. He opened four others: two in Pittsburgh and one in Altoona, which are all now closed, and one in Camp Hill, which is still open.

Has business gone up and down, over the years?

Sure. We've actually always done better when the economy is worse. We're priced at a level where people feel like they can go when they're feeling a pinch. That's something I think differentiates us - most restaurants try to get between \$40 to \$50 a head for an average check. Our guest check average is something like \$21. Our objective has always been to produce as high-quality food as we can, while keeping prices reasonable. The quality of our food had gone up, too, especially since Jason took over.

How did it happen that Jason was the one who took up the reins?

I have four children, but it was always assumed he'd be the one. I knew it when he was 8 years old. One day I had something to do, so I brought him over here and showed him how to set the tables in the back room. I come back a couple hours later and he was fuming! He went down the list of each staff member and described exactly what they'd done during their shift. He said, "That bus girl, she just sat at that table in the back the whole time and read the newspaper. She finally went to the bathroom and I threw the newspaper away!"

Jason, did you always want to get into this business?

Yeah. It's kind of like asking a kid on the farm if he wanted to be a farmer when his dad was Old MacDonald. I would always follow my dad around, he was like my hero.

Since taking over as GM, you've made some changes?

I've upgraded a lot of the ingredients. Anything and everything I could. The cheese for the pizza. The tempura batter for the fish and chips. All our chicken breasts are cage-free and antibiotic-free. I'm big on non-GMO. I get my hamburger buns from Germany, because the European Union has stricter regulations against them. All of our pastas are imported from Italy - something like 85 percent of the wheat grown in America is genetically modified.

I'd really like to make our entire menu non-GMO, but I'm conflicted. We have so many customers who think of Gullifty's like a second home, and if I went to a completely non-GMO menu - I'd have to take away some of their favorites. Like Coca-Cola, for example. And some of the beers, like Bud and Bud Light.

Your beer list is pretty impressive in general - when did you get into that?

It was back in 1997 that we put 120 beers on the menu, and also expanded from four taps to 18. My dad was inspired by a trip to New York, where he ate at this restaurant in Times Square called Jekyll & Hyde. It was a horror-themed restaurant but it also had something like 50 beers on tap and tons in a bottle. When we did it, no one had heard of most of these beers - there was a lot from Europe. We were also one of the first in Pennsylvania to carry Sam Adams. We won "best beer selection on the Main Line" 8 years in a row.

Craft beer has really taken off recently - has your selection changed at all?

Here's the thing. I have a contrarian streak, and I really started getting a distaste for the culture. Not to take away from all the great craft breweries, but the mentality has almost become bully-ish. It became snobbish. I realized a lot of our customers, like my friends who work in construction, just don't want to drink a freakin' Chimay after a hard day's work. They want to drink an ice-cold Miller Lite, and why should anyone tell them not to? So I brought a lot of the macros back - I carry around 25 of them, in draft and bottle, and I'm proud of it.

But they have GMO ingredients?

Right. That's part of my conflict. [Those macro beer companies] lobbied the government to not have to list their ingredients - they say it's proprietary, they just don't want people to know their beer has high fructose corn syrup in it. And recently there's been a surge in lighter, easy-drinking craft beers like lagers and pilsners and session IPAs. So there would be something to replace the macros if I did take them off.

How about social media; do you use that to promote your restaurant?

I don't like social media. I understand it's a way to connect with people, but my instinct is that it's making us more separate. The thing I like most about a restaurant is that one of our most basic human connections is eating in a communal way. You come home from the hunt, you light the fire, and everyone in the tribe eats. I hate the idea of check in here, check in there. In my family, we're not allowed to have our phones at the table.

Luckily, our assistant general manager is actually getting his MBA in restaurant marketing right now, so he does all the Facebook and Twitter and all that for us. And it he does a very good job. But what I don't like is people focusing too much on that and not paying attention to the product they're putting out. It's more important to us to use great ingredients and offer good value. Which we've done now for 40 years.

Gullifty's

1149 Lancaster Ave., Rosemont, 610-525-1851

Hours: 11 a.m. to midnight Sunday through Thursday, 11 a.m to 1 a.m. Friday and Saturday