

Dino and Nunzi's Rat Packers

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Nunzi's Place has been serving up pasta and beer for nearly 60 years on the east side. I grew up eating in the dining room, which was fine, but it always seemed like people were having more fun in the bar.

There'd be a bunch of regulars in there every evening, joking with the bartender and watching sports while they worked on huge plates of Nunzi's spaghetti.

Most of those guys are still there, and it turns out they are having more fun.

"We have a lot of loyal regulars," co-owner Betsy Cilladi told me. "Employees, too. Our daytime bartender has been here longer than I can remember."

Betsy's family, the Annunziatas, opened Nunzi's Place back in 1953, and it's remained a family establishment. She currently operates it with her husband, Mike Cilladi. Unfortunately, their kids show little interest in taking over.

"One lives in Washington and the other in Myrtle Beach," Betsy Cilladi said. "They're long gone. But I have faith in my grandson. We're hoping the restaurant gene skips a generation."

The regulars are hoping so, too.

"I don't know what I'd do without their crab meat lasagna," one of them told me. "I get it every Friday, with shrimp Alfredo."

Nunzi's offers a couple seasonal specials that keep the regulars coming back as well.

"In the summer, it's steamed clams or Italian mussels with a tall Yuengling draft," said Cilladi. "In winter, we do a pound of steak with the Yuengling."

She told me about another winter tradition when I commented on the animatronic Dean Martin doll that perches above the bar.

"Dino only comes down once a year," she said. "On Christmas Eve. We serve a lot of antipasto that day, and everybody has a good time. Sooner or later, we get Dino down, and he sings."

Knowing that Dino seldom passed up a photo opportunity, I asked if maybe he wouldn't mind making two appearances this year. Cilladi didn't think he'd object, so she had the bartender climb up and help him down.

Dino, as you'd expect, headed straight for the bar, buddying up to Richard Blausen and Jay Mikowski, a couple of regular Nunzi's Rat Packers. After a snootful of beer, he picked up his mike and proceeded to croon "That's Amore." Then he grabbed a bottle of Sambuca and stumbled home to his shelf to prepare for his big Christmas gig.

Even when Dino's not around, there's usually something to cheer about at Nunzi's. On NFL game days, the Browns and Steelers each get a television. Fans wearing orange and brown sit on one side of the room, while the black and gold army sets up on the other.

"Which side do you root for?" I asked Cilladi.

"Whichever one's selling more beer," she said with a laugh.

So the next time you're in Nunzi's, why not have your pasta at the bar? If you can't find a stool, don't worry -- just tell Dino "Dan-o" sent you. He'll squeeze you in.