

Good eats and ringside seats at Bizzarro's



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November 4, 2010 12:01 AM, Erie Times-News

There's a long tradition of boxers opening bars and restaurants after they retire from the ring. There was Sugar Ray's in Harlem, Jack Dempsey's on Broadway and Rocky Graziano's in Miami.

Here in Erie, we have Lou Bizzarro's Ringside Restaurant. The Bizzarro family is a three-generation boxing dynasty with more than 200 wins under their collective belts. Lou's last bout

was in 1982, the same year he started his restaurant. Like boxing, the Ringside is a family affair for the Bizzarros.

"Eight of us work here," said Lou's son Louie Bizzarro Jr. (24-3-0), a cook and bartender.

Louie has worked at the Ringside for more than 20 years. So has his cousin Maria Beaman, a multi-tasking dynamo who waits tables and tends bar -- often at the same time. In a matter of minutes I watched her deliver four plates of rigatoni, mix a rum and Coke, bag a 12-pack, and send an order of homemade tripe out the door.

When the next wave of hungry customers came in she started on their orders before they could sit down.

"Three Buds, right?" she said, swinging open the cooler. "And I know you guys want the Stallion."

The Italian Stallion is a heaping platter of spaghetti, ravioli and stuffed shells. It's one of the Ringside's big sellers, and was indeed what the guys wanted.

"We have a lot of regulars," said Beaman. "I know what they eat and what they drink, and they appreciate that. On my last birthday the place was overflowing with all the presents everybody got me. We could hardly move in here!"

The Bizzarros are, of course, Italian (Lou was born in Marcianise), so nonregulars can expect the same level of jocular hospitality. Before I finished my first beer, Maria was already calling me Danny.

Hanging out at the Ringside is kind of like sitting around a big Italian family's living room. Brothers and sisters and nieces and nephews stopped in throughout the evening to say hi and have a drink. When I got out the camera, Maria yelled to her cousin in the kitchen:

"Hey Louie! Get out here and get in the picture!"

The scene was so congenial, people who came by to pick up their takeout orders were reluctant to leave. They lingered over their last drop of beer, glancing guiltily at the quickly cooling bag of pasta on the bar. It was only the imminent threat of microwaved meatballs that finally sent them hustling for home.

Autographed 8-by-10s of diverse Italians (Dom DeLuise and Lou Tullio share a corner) cover

the Ringside's walls, but the spots of highest honor are reserved for the boxing Bizarros themselves.

There are framed newspaper clippings of their numerous title fights and a big portrait of Lou back in the glory days. The whole place is done up to resemble a boxing ring, with multicolored ropes and a fight scene mural over the bar.

It's enough to inspire fisticuffs, though I wouldn't recommend it -- not with all those Bizarros hanging around.