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The Rainbow Family Restaurant is one of Durham's oldest establishments that has been operated continually under the same ownership. Since 1958, the Givelas family has been serving the community with its "Original GMC Breakfast," drawing on Oshawa's history as an automotive hub. Since that time The Rainbow has become a local legend, and has gained a network of staunchly loyal patrons. East of Toronto, Oshawa still maintains its small-town feel, and The Rainbow Family Restaurant has been a pillar of the city's downtown core for over half a century.

In a story that reads like the fabled 'American Dream', the Givelas family emigrated from Greece during a politically turbulent time for the country. With aspirations of a comfortable, peaceful and (if fate be good) prosperous life, brothers Nick, Chris and Steve, together with their father John, came to Canada and opened the Rainbow Family Restaurant at its original location in Whitby. Not many years after that, the Oshawa location was opened at its present address.

In its early years, The Rainbow served customers 24 hours a day, catering to the shift workers of General Motors' south plant. To meet these demanding hours, the entire family pitched in to staff the restaurant. Chef Lou Givelas, current owner and son of Chris and his wife Dee, recalls The Rainbow's beginnings. "At the time there were only two restaurants in the area," he explains. "The other was The Globe Chinese restaurant, which has since changed locations."

Now, as much as then, The Rainbow continues to be supportive of the workers of Oshawa's automotive industry. In a new initiative for the city, the restaurant is even participating in the Historical Automotive Trail, a tourism attraction promoted in Durham Region. "We've always been firm supporters of the workers," Lou says. "Back then, and still today, GM is the largest local employer in Oshawa."

The Rainbow Family Restaurant hasn't changed much since its early days. But with

THE RAINBOW FAMILY
RESTAURANT IS

Oshawa's Local Legend

more than half a century of success, Lou sees no reason why it should change. As he says, “We’ve been doing business for 57 years, so we must be doing something right.” The décor, especially, is very similar to what it was back in the late 50s, with only minimal updates over the years. “There used to be curtains,” Lou explains, “but they tended to make the interior dark, so I took them down. We’ve added new light fixtures, and brightened up the walls with our signature banana yellow colour. The objective is to keep it bright and airy.”

A NOD TO HOME COOKING

Of course, there are a number of popular 50s- and 60s-themed diners in the region, franchises that attempt to revive that sense of longing for the slower pace of times past. But with their carefully staged replicas and nostalgia-inspired menus, Lou argues that they have a distinctly “cookie-cutter” feel. “There’s no flair,” he laments. “Most places don’t even offer homemade food. I know what customers like to eat. It’s something I’d cook for myself. Quality service, quality food, and a reasonable price—that’s the formula.” As to the atmosphere of his restaurant, which definitely has an undercurrent of the nostalgic to it, he adds, “We don’t try, we just do. We have it, why mess with it?”

One aspect of the restaurant in which Lou Givelas takes particular pride is the fact that his chefs have no professional training. But since the entire menu is a nod to home cooking, the simple, wholesome nature of the fare is what attracts people. Lou cites the restaurant’s signature peameal bacon as an example. “Through regular distributors, the peameal usually comes pre-cut, making it uniform each time. At The Rainbow, the peameal is cut on the premises. It’s judged by the human eye, and prone to human error, which means you’re getting larger portions than you would find elsewhere. But that human error makes for a better breakfast.”

It’s remarkable that The Rainbow remains so busy, especially considering its location in downtown Oshawa. “Getting people to come in is an issue because of the location and the parking,” Lou admits. “But once they’re in, they come back.”



They do come back—in droves. There is a constant stream of customers, which Lou attributes to the food. “I know my clientele. I know how discerning they can be, even of their local diners.” Prompt service is also a top priority for staff at The Rainbow. It has to be, with only sixty-six seats and lineups that are sometimes out the door.

Taking advantage of the social media boom, The Rainbow has its own Twitter and Facebook profiles to help spread the word about the restaurant. “It’s working, too,” Lou states proudly. “Customers regularly go on our Facebook page to post their own pictures, and interact on Twitter.” Chef Lou also has his own Youtube channel, with video clips from the various television spots he’s been invited to, most notably Daytime Durham.

This is about the only marketing The Rainbow does, in fact. The rest is entirely word-of-mouth. The staff works hard to earn the recommendations his patrons make of his restaurant to each other, and Lou doesn’t take it for granted. He’s there every day running the kitchen, ensuring his standards of quality and service remain high in order to compete with the other local businesses. As he says, “I am The Rainbow Family Restaurant.”

With the University of Ontario Institute of Technology and the Oshawa campus of Durham College installed within the

last decade, the demographic has changed from what it was fifty years ago. “We’re aware of the trends,” Lou says. “I watch Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives and You Gotta Eat Here, and I know we have a younger demographic in the area.”

To appeal to this up-and-coming generation, The Rainbow has introduced what Lou calls its “obscene” food. In a sort of daredevil section of the menu, selections such as “The M.A.D. Louie” and the “Rainbokenstein’s Monster” can be found. These items may sound preposterous, but Chef Lou insists they’re delicious. “I’ve tried them all,” he boasts. Besides, a major reason for the “obscene” food is to make customers remember The Rainbow, and to get them talking about it. “They may not go for that particular item again next time, but they will come back. With their friends.”

From Oshawa’s east to west—and even beyond—The Rainbow is a local legend. People love it for the food, for the feel, and for the friendly staff. But if you’re not convinced, if you need further proof that The Rainbow Family Restaurant is simply the best little diner in Oshawa, then you need look no further than the local police force. Chef Lou identifies these men and women as the most discerning of his regular clientele. “If you want to know somewhere good to eat,” he laughs, “ask a cop. They always know.” ■