

Elgin This Month

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- **Jim Innes**
Marriage, 2014 style Page 4
- **Renee Carpenter**
Arrange like a pro Page 28
- **Duncan Watterworth**
Roadkill Page 30

Also Inside:

Aylmer & Area Chamber of Commerce Pages 18 and 19
Running A Small Business Pages 20-26

Phil Di Losa
Chef Bondi at 50
Cover story: Page 3

Incorporating St. Thomas & District Chamber of Commerce **BUSINESS BEAT**

Good pizza – Chef Bondi celebrates the transition from mostly roast beef 50 years ago

by Terry Carroll

The Chef Bondi logo is a circle crowned with the words “GOOOOOD PIZZA.” And while the restaurant now has a wide variety of offerings on its menu, owner Phil Di Losa says the quality of his pizzas, above all else, has allowed the restaurant to thrive for 50 years.

Phil has been involved for 48 of those years. He emigrated from Sicily to Canada with his family after WWII. His father came in 1951 and worked at Labatt in London in maintenance, and the family followed in 1952. They chose this area because they knew the Lombardo family, the most famous of whom was Guy Lombardo.

Unfortunately, Phil’s dad died in 1959 at the age of 56. Phil finished high school and trained in New York as a linotype operator, getting his first job at The Globe & Mail in Toronto. But a strike at The Globe – and the fact that he wasn’t crazy about Toronto – lured Phil back to this area where he went to work at the St. Thomas Times-Journal as a linotype operator.

Phil recognized that cold type was rapidly replacing hot lead in the newspaper business. He was encouraged by a family friend, Gus Bondi, to become a partner in the relatively new Bondi pizza restaurant in St. Thomas in 1966. The rest is business history, with the two men forming a limited company and staying business partners and friends in the restaurant and other business interests.

There were nine Bondi pizza locations in the London area at that time, and when other Bondi locations were sold, Phil and Gus Bondi made the name change to Chef Bondi. It wasn’t easy in the early days. “St. Thomas was a roast beef town,” Phil says with a smile. “People didn’t know what pizza was. I used to stand in the window tossing the dough in the air so people would know what we were all about.”

While there is tremendous competition in the pizza and restaurant industry, Phil proudly says, “Over the years, 25 pizza places have failed in

this town, and we’re still here.” He attributes this largely to the standards set in the early days, the ones Phil and his staff follow to this day.

He works with three main restaurant suppliers – Galati, Rico Foods and Cysco, with some purchases from Summit Foods – always buying in bulk so he can be competitive in price, while maintaining quality standards. “We cook all our items from scratch and we cook all our own sauces.”

fresh dough, made every day, and he cooks in gas-fired ovens.

At Chef Bondi, a customer has two choices: cheese on the bottom, or cheese on the top. Cheese on the bottom is the regular North American way. Cheese on the top is a Chicago-style stuffed pizza, sealing in the flavours.

Over the years, Chef Bondi has expanded its varieties of pizzas, to include, for example, the Supreme and the Super, both with lots of meat as well as vegetarian items. And the menu goes well beyond pizza to include spaghetti, lasagna, ravioli, manicotti, panzerotti, wings, nuggets, submarines and salads.

But Phil points out that “I can make you a pizza just like they do in Italy, with crust, tomato sauce, cheese, fresh basil, maybe some tomatoes and olive oil ... That’s a margarita like they make in Naples.”

Phil honours his Italian roots, with trips back to island where he was born, and in 2008, he took his entire family for a visit.

A very Canadian love – hockey – is evident in the restaurant along with many photos of his original native land. He has autographed photos from hockey greats like Wayne Gretzky and Bobby Orr as well as pictures of his children and grandchildren in their hockey uniforms, and photos of teams Chef Bondi has sponsored. All his children were involved in soccer, baseball and hockey. “They never got in any trouble, and now their sons and daughters are the same.” Two of his children are

chemical engineers, one is a speech therapist and one heads up a VISA division for CIBC – not a pizza maker among them, so Chef Bondi is now for sale.

While that process continues, Phil (his real name is Felix, but he’s always been Phil) continues on at the age of 72.

And what is Phil Di Losa’s favourite pizza? “Every Saturday after church, I make a small, thin crust with Spanish onions and hot peppers. I love it. It’s very tasty, the cheese is tasty, I can taste the sauce.”

Cover photo by Philip Bell, Shutter Studios.



Chef Bondi purchases sun-ripened tomato products from California, for their sweetness. “Because of the short growing season in Canada, there’s a lot of acid in Canadian tomatoes,” he says. He and one of his long-time staff make the pizza sauce according to his mother’s recipe every Tuesday, and Phil enjoys demonstrating how thick it is. (They also make lasagna the same day, 24 lasagnas for the week. “When they’re gone, that’s it. I tell people they’ll have to wait until next Wednesday,” Phil says.) The cheese for pizzas, he buys only from Galati in Windsor, for true Italian mozzarella flavour. The restaurant uses