Keystone Cuisine
By Sam MacDonald

Turillo’s Steak House

A tiny town of 700 residents, Jennerstown, Pennsylvania, has developed an outsized reputation as a place to go. And stop. And go again.

Part of that status rests on U.S. 30, the road through the heart of the small town. Route 30 was once a powerful economic force, packed with drivers in need of gasoline, car parts, and a hearty lunch. It ceased serving as a major east-west thoroughfare when the Pennsylvania Turnpike opened in 1940, but steep hills and hairpin turns, the very factors that made 30 inefficient for rapid interstate travel, made it perfect for other purposes.

For decades, major corporations such as Bendix have maintained testing facilities in the area, using local roads to develop brake systems for cars, tanks, tractor-trailers, and just about everything else on wheels. While some testing has moved to carefully controlled tracks, the Jennerstown cross-country mountain course remains an industry standard.

Joe Turillo and Cynthia Turillo-Sutton have seen these tests—and the testers—up close. Route 30 runs directly in front of Turillos’s Steak House, the family restaurant that Sam and Pat Turillo—Joe and Cynthia’s mother and father—opened in 1957; before that their parents owned and operated the Hi Way Cafe at the same location. “I can remember seeing the convoys pass,” Joe says. “Tanks. Personnel carriers. It was constant.”

It was also constant business for the Turillo family. “We had five or six apartments upstairs, over top of the restaurant,” Cynthia says. “My parents rented them out to the testers.”

Those testers were also the Turillo’s neighbors: the family lived upstairs, too. They did not stop renting out rooms until the mid-1960s, when they knocked down a few walls and took over the entire space. Sam and Pat lived there until they bought a house a quarter-mile down the road in 1990. Joe now occupies the apartment.

Sam and Pat still own Turillo’s—they are also regulars—but Joe and Cynthia operate the restaurant now. Who is the manager? They look at each other and chuckle. “I don’t even know if I have a title,” Cynthia says. They both have been working there since elementary school, peeling potatoes, scrubbing floors, waiting tables. It’s just how things are.

Turillo’s Steak House isn’t big on change, though things do evolve. The establishment was a Turillo’s-owned roadside lunch counter and produce stand until 1957. Sam Turillo transformed it into a steak house in 1966. Apart from that, continuity rules. There are only 14 people on the staff. Waitress Helen Kozuch had been working there for 36 years when she recently retired. Several others have been there close to 30 years. At the other end of the spectrum are the 19-year-old waitress and 17-year-old busboy—Cynthia’s children, and the family’s fourth generation.

The décor is equally homespun: the artwork, painted by regional artists, depicts local scenes. Vintage orange booths—well suited for a high-end retro café in New York City—provide seating in the front. Wall sconces from the same period provide the lighting. “I don’t know,” Joe laughs when asked about their origins. “They’ve just always been here.”

The menu conveys a similar sense of familiarity: steaks, seafood, and Italian. Cynthia makes the tomato sauce, having taken over that job from her mother. The steaks are cut on-site. The house dressing is the same as it has always been—crumbled bleu cheese in a vinaigrette rather than a cream base. The most popular entrée is still the special-cut New York Strip: $14.85 with a choice of two sides.

When asked how Turillo’s has managed to thrive despite its relative isolation, Cynthia pauses for a moment. “Well,” she says, “I think the people who work here are friends with the customers. The food’s good. The prices are reasonable. It’s nothing fancy.”

But it’s fancy enough. When asked to describe the atmosphere, Joe and Cynthia again share a laugh. “Well, at one table, you’ll
have a woman in a mink coat,” Joe says. “And
the next table over, you’ll have a guy with
grease all over his clothes because he just got
done changing his oil.”

The oil-changing crowd comes from the
Jennerstown Speedway. A nationally
recognized half-mile track, the speedway has
been drawing racing enthusiasts to town since
the 1920s. (Sam Turillo helped spearhead a
modernization project there in the late
1960s.) The mink-coat crowd is drawn to the
Mountain Playhouse, one of the oldest (and
one of only 12 remaining) professional
summer stock theaters in the United States.
Professional actors from Washington, D.C.
and New York City live at the theater—housed
in an 1804 grist mill—all summer.

Ultimately, however, it’s the regulars that
Joe and Cynthia remember most: the
customers who know which waitress will get
them to the play on time, and which ones will
stop and chat. The regulars who come back
after 20 years and still recognize the place. “We
get it all the time,” Cynthia said. “They move
away to New York or California. When they
come back, they stop for dinner to see if it’s
the same. To see if we’re still here.”

Yes, Turillo’s is still there, serving
excellent food to locals, race fans, theater-
goers, and anyone else negotiating the twists
and turns of Route 30. So go ahead, test your
brakes. It’s well worth the stop.

Sam MacDonald was born and raised in Ridgway,
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