



KEYSTONE CUISINE

By Reid R. Frazier

Big Jim's in the Run Greenfield, Pa.

Pittsburgh, as any amateur geographer knows, is punctuated by a series of sharp ravines, etched by streams heading downhill, toward the rivers. Wander up one of these hollows, Four Mile Run, and you'll find a bowl-shaped neighborhood with the feel of a small town that's been air-lifted into a major American city. Hemmed in by a highway, several bridges, and train tracks, there's only

one main road going into or out of the neighborhood: Saline Street.

At the center of this pocket-sized district sits Big Jim's Restaurant, a spot that feels like a small town eatery, complete with a regular cast of customers, and food just like grandma used to make. That grandma was Migliorina Bochicchio [Bo-KEE-kio], mother of Vincent "Jim" Bochicchio, the restaurant's eponymous founder. In addition to being big, Jim was smart enough to incorporate his mother's Italian Wedding Soup, meatballs, and spaghetti sauce into the repertoire of bar food served at his restaurant, which he opened in 1977.

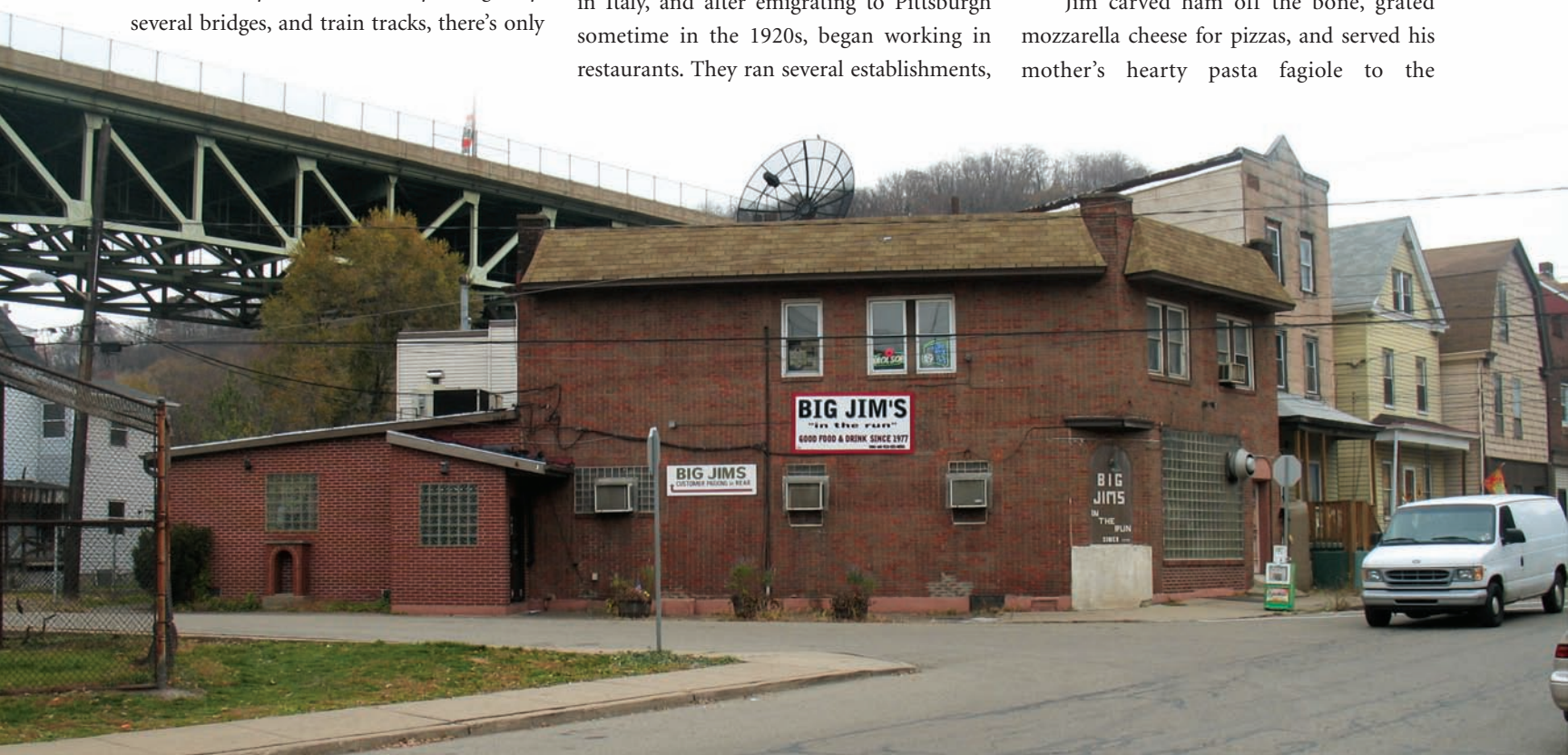
Migliorina and her husband Vito (better known here as "Mary" and "Bill") were born in Italy, and after emigrating to Pittsburgh sometime in the 1920s, began working in restaurants. They ran several establishments,

including Jim's Inn, in Bloomfield.

Jim Bochicchio and his wife Joyce also worked in the business, running a restaurant on the North Side. In the late '70s, they were looking for a place to relocate. At the time, they also needed a place to live. They found a bar and grill at Saline and Alexis streets in the Run, with an apartment upstairs where they could live with their children.

The bar was also close to the hungry and thirsty steelworkers coming off their shifts from the nearby LTV plant in Hazelwood. Back then, "it was more of a shot and a beer type place," says Gary Burdick, a manager and co-owner of Big Jim's. "It was mainly for steelworkers coming in from the night shift who weren't ready to go home yet."

Jim carved ham off the bone, grated mozzarella cheese for pizzas, and served his mother's hearty pasta fagiale to the



Big Jim's in the Run has been serving up home-style Italian food since 1977. All photos Reid Frazier.



Vincent Bochicchio
a.k.a. "Big Jim."

millworkers.¹ He touted that his was "the biggest ham sandwich in Pittsburgh."

"When the steel mills were open, that place was hummin'," says Vito Bochicchio, Big Jim's nephew and a co-owner. "It was like every day was Friday." The mills eventually went away, and with them a good chunk of take-out orders, but the restaurant remained.²

In 1991, Big Jim passed away. Vito Bochicchio, Big Jim's nephew, and Burdick, who'd worked there as a manager, became co-owners, along with another investor. Burdick, originally from Titusville, Pa. (population: 7,000) liked the small-town feel of the restaurant. It was the kind of place where you knew all the customers by name, he says. "It was like walking into your own home and having dinner."



The menu has adapted to fit with the times (you can get eggplant parmesan with meatless sauce and a black bean burger now, for instance), but many of the recipes are the same ones Migliorina Bochicchio brought over from Italy. "She was a typical

old Italian lady," remembers Mary Ellen Stinger, a waitress who's worked at the restaurant for 30 years. "All she ever did was cook."

Among the regulars who still come around is William "Scratchy" Kolesar, 78. Kolesar lives in the house he was born in, a few

blocks away, where his parents raised 12 children. He remembers when the neighborhood had several grocery stores and people kept chickens, horses, and pigs on the hillsides further up the Run. Everybody seemed to have a nickname, like Chewing gum, Peanut, and Bug-o. (Kolesar used to be known as "Wee-Wee." His stint in the Navy bestowed "Scratchy" upon him.)³

The restaurant still draws a brisk dinner crowd, in spite of its location. Burdick thinks the Run is part of its allure. "I think it's a destination," he says. "It always amazed me, from Day One, that it was as busy as it is, because it's so hard to find."

Burdick has had periodic thoughts of changing the menu around, but has always thought better of it. "Sometimes I have this grand idea of changing things," he says, "but this is just one of those places that just remains the same."⁴



Big Jim's in the Run
201 Saline Street
Pittsburgh, Pa. 15207
(412) 421-0532

Reid R. Frazier is a freelance writer and radio producer. He is a graduate of Hampshire College and holds a master's degree in history from the University of Vermont. He writes about science, medicine, environment, and culture. He lives in Pittsburgh with his wife and two daughters.

¹ Mary Ellen Stinger interview with author, 11/12/08; Vito Bochicchio interview with author, 11/12/08.

² Stinger, interview with author 11/12/08.

³ William Kolesar, interview with author 11/12/08.

⁴ Gary Burdick, interview with author 10/15/08.