



Berkley History & Museum Happenings

June 2023



Dominico's Entrance & Dining Room 1953 till 1971

Pizza in Berkley – Chapter 1 of 2

by Don Callihan

Pizza Pie

In March of 1953, pizza pie made its way to Berkley. Before that time, it was primarily known only to those of Italian heritage and GIs who had served in Italy during World War II. People soon learned that it wasn't a pie in the traditional sense of the word. Pies have filling, whereas pizza has toppings, and the word "pie" fell by the wayside. It simply became "pizza."

Berkley's First Pizzeria

Berkley's first pizza restaurant, or pizzeria, was in a storefront on the west side of Coolidge, just south of Wiltshire (the current site of Elaine's Bagels). Those with a Berkley past already know its name, Dominico's. Dominico's was founded by Dominic Michael Cotroneio and his uncle, Bill Orr. A few years after the business started, Michael bought out his partner and made Dominico's a Berkley institution.

When asked how the restaurant got its name, Michael replied, "I was christened Dominic, but nobody ever called me that. I was always Michael, my middle name, But Dominic is my first name, and I decided to use it for the restaurant."

Michael Cotroneio

Michael was born in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, on January 14, 1922, and came to Detroit in the later 1920s with his family. He graduated from Detroit's Cooley High School in 1940 and began taking accounting classes at the Walsh Institute in downtown Detroit (now Walsh College in Troy). He soon landed a job in the accounting department of the Great Lakes Division of Greyhound Corporation. With the United States fighting World War II, Michael enlisted in the U.S. Army on January 27, 1943 and served as a quartermaster until January 14, 1946.

After his discharge, Michael enrolled in night classes at Wayne University (it was not a state university at the time) under the GI Bill and returned to his pre-war employer, Greyhound Corporation. Sometime in the late 40s, or early 50s, Michael graduated with a degree in accounting.

During his college years, Michael was introduced to the pizza business. His mother, Josephine Orrico, had a sister Clotilda who married Joseph

. continued on page 2



Berkley Kit Home Tour

September 30, 2023

In honor of Berkley's 100th anniversary as a village, the Berkley Historical Museum and the Berkley Area Chamber of Commerce are sponsoring a Kit Home Tour. Scan the QR code below for more details.



In This Issue

- Pizza in Berkley Part 1 of 2
- Making Pizza at Dominico's
- The Museum Gift Shop
- The Museum Corner Sign-Up

Pizza in Berkley – Chapter 1 of 2 - *continued from page 1*

Amato in 1927. Joseph worked various jobs until 1946 when he and Clotilda opened Amato's Italian Restaurant on Wyoming Avenue in east Dearborn. In addition to traditional Italian fare, the restaurant served pizza pie, which soon became its highest-volume item. Clotilda's obituary credits Amato's with introducing Dearborn to pizza.

As with many "mom & pop" restaurants, Amato's relied on family for employees. Michael became one of those employees when he resigned his position at Greyhound to manage the restaurant. It is unknown why he made this career change, the pay may have been better, or maybe Michael just wanted to escape from corporate life. He may have even planned to start his own restaurant and wanted the experience.

And "start his own restaurant," he did. Thanks to his accounting/business experience, the organizational skills he developed in the Army, the practical skills he learned at Amato's, his work ethic, and the emergence of Pizza as one of America's first fast foods, Dominico's was successful from the beginning.

Dominico's Restaurant

The restaurant was nothing fancy. It mainly featured square and a few round wooden tables with Formica tops and wooden kitchen-style chairs. The square tables were easily rearranged to accommodate groups. Each long wall had a large wallpaper mural to add to the atmosphere. Oil lamp-style chandeliers provided light, and asphalt tile covered the floor. However, its main feature was a large glass window on the back wall. This is where Michael stood while he kneaded the pizza dough and tossed it up in the air with a spinning motion to the delight of the restaurant's patrons. Sometimes, when Michael threw the pizza up, it did not come down. Unknown to observers, there was a shelf above the pizza window. Michael would deliberately toss the dough high enough to land it on the shelf and create the illusion that the pizza dough simply disappeared. Of course, he would fain a puzzled expression to emphasize the fantasy.

Going out to eat was becoming more prevalent, and family-oriented restaurants with affordable prices were thriving. If Amato's introduced pizza to Dearborn, Dominico's introduced it to Berkley. Pizza was not only a delectable treat but a social phenomenon, especially with the younger crowd. In the 30s and 40s, the malt shop was the place to go after the game or after the dance. In the 50s and 60s, it became the pizzeria, and Dominico's was the Berkley's place to be. On Friday nights during the school year, the restaurant was taken over by swarms of Berkley High Schoolers who lined up outside to get a table.

In addition to providing entertainment while making pizza, the pizza window was the perfect place to monitor what was happening in the restaurant. If the kids got too rowdy, Michael would send his mother, Josephine, out to restore order. She could conjure up the right amount of grandmotherly sternness to settle the kids down and not discourage them from returning.

Just like Amato's, Dominico's employed family. From the beginning, Michael's parents, George and Josephine, worked at the restaurant daily. Michael also employed many Berkley moms and teenagers. Mabel Fraser, a future Berkley mayor, and all her kids worked there over the years.

Wedding Bells Ring

Michael didn't find time to marry until May of 1963. His wife, Marie Jean Ferland, grew up on the east side of Ferndale and graduated from Hazel Park High School. Michael and Marie met at Gelio's, an Italian restaurant/pizzeria on the Royal Oak side of Woodward, just north of the present-day Sign of the Beefcarver restaurant. Perhaps Michael was there checking out the competition and found a wife instead.

Building the Business

Michael was always looking for ways to increase business. He began offering delivery in 1960. This was just after Berkley's second pizza business,

continued on page 3



Michael Cotroneo Twirls a Pizza Crust

Making Pizza at Dominico's

Dominico's began the pizza-making process by making pizza dough; the right blend of bread flour, semolina flour, yeast, sugar, salt, and olive oil. Once blended and kneaded, the dough was allowed to rise (proof) to obtain the right lightness for pizza crust. After proofing, the dough was divided and shaped into balls for small, medium, and large pizzas. The balls were placed in air-tight containers and refrigerated to retard rising. A few hours before use, the dough balls were removed from the refrigerator and allowed to come to room temperature. The dough was stretched to make a small disk and then tossed and spun in the air to stretch the dough into a round shape. Tossing also helps retain moisture and entrapped carbon dioxide, resulting in a lighter crust.

Michael's special sauce was spread on the crust, followed by cheese and toppings. Dominico's used bricks of Grande brand mozzarella cheese that were shredded on-site. Tuma cheese, a fresh cheese made of ewe's or cow's milk that has not been salted or aged, was also received in bricks, shredded, and blended with the mozzarella to obtain Dominico's unique pizza flavor.

Pepperoni was received as individual pork-based sausages and sliced on-site to ensure the correct thickness. Too thick or thin and the edges will not turn up and create a bowl that traps a little grease resulting in enhanced flavor.

The pizza was baked in a stone-hearth oven at 500°F for 5 minutes, sliced, and served to Dominico's hungry patrons.

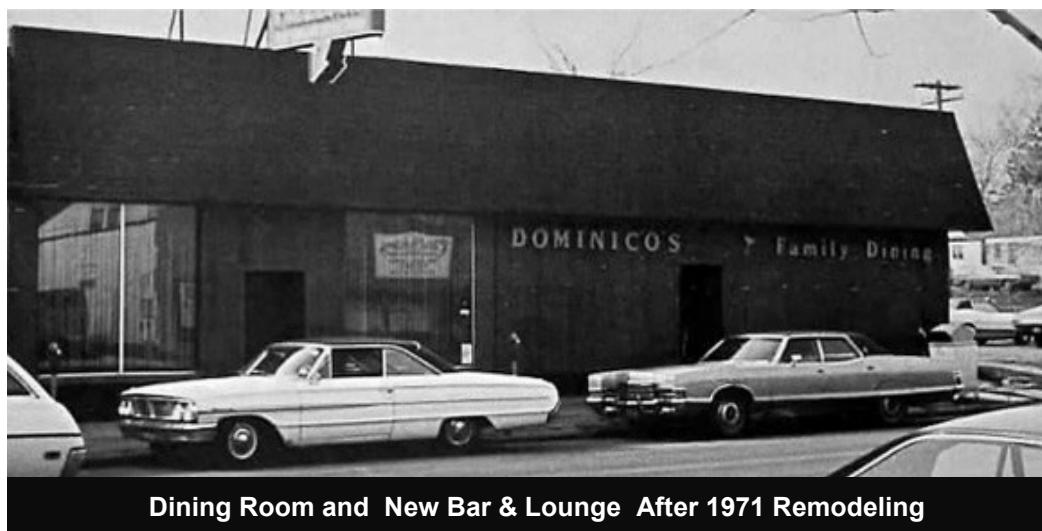
Pizza in Berkley – Chapter 1 of 2 - continued from page 2

Sila's, opened in the summer of 1959. At the time, Sila's was carry-out and delivery only, but they were competition. As the delivery business grew, Michael bought classic army-style Jeep vehicles and equipped them with insulated boxes to keep the pizzas hot while out for delivery. However, he soon learned that delivery drivers were extremely hard on the Jeeps and eventually required drivers to use their own vehicles.

Beer, Wine & Then Some

In 1961 Michael sought a license to sell beer and wine at the request of many of his customers. The Berkley Advance quoted him as saying, "It's hardly an Italian dinner without wine." The Berkley City Council declined to act on his request, and it took until 1973 to get a full-fledged liquor license.

With the ability to sell cocktails as well as beer and wine, Michael decided to remodel the restaurant and build a bar and lounge on the north side of the main dining room. He acquired the building to the north and combined it with the private dining room to create the bar & lounge. J's Bar & Grill currently occupies that space.



Dining Room and New Bar & Lounge After 1971 Remodeling

Some of the main dining room remodeling work was done by Berkley High School students who were enrolled in vocational carpentry classes under the direction of carpentry teacher David Alschbach. Michael paid for all the materials while allowing the students to gain valuable work experience.

In 1980, seeking to expand the menu, Michael hired, Ezzie Holyk, the long-time chef at The Club Berkley. He brought his signature dishes, pickerel, trout almonidine, Dover sole, perch, turtle soup & frog legs, with him. Even though the menu was now more upscale, the traditional pizza and pasta remained reasonably priced.

Michael's Health Begins to Decline

Michael began having heart problems in his 50s and, in 1980, underwent a quadruple bypass to remedy the situation. With help from his two sons, Michael Jr. and George, his wife and parents ran the restaurant while he recuperated. He returned strong but started having more health problems as the years passed. He put the business up for sale and, in the spring of 1987, sold it to Edward Gorman and his family.

New Owners and Disaster

The Gormans operated the restaurant for the next two years but could not keep it going. Michael got the restaurant back in the summer of 1989 and although he and the family made it work again. Michael quickly learned that he was not up to the daily grind of running a restaurant and sold it a second time. Once again, the new owners could not turn a profit, and Michael reclaimed the restaurant for the second time. He found a third buyer and thought he was finally out from under the business.

However, the last sale was a disaster. Unknown to Michael, the new owner registered Michael's Federal Employee Identification Number with the IRS but did not forward the money withheld from employees' paychecks. While the exact details are unknown, the restaurant was auctioned off to pay the shortage as well as the fines imposed, and Michael lost all his equity. It was a sad ending for someone who had given so much to the Berkley community. A short time later, Michael passed away on July 6, 1992, at age 70.

Michael Honored by the City of Berkley

On October 8, 1992, *The Daily Tribune* reported the following on page 8A:

Michael "Mickey" Cotroneio, the longtime owner of Dominico's Restaurant on Coolidge who died in July, has been recognized by the Berkley City Council for his many contributions to the city. He was cited for his financial support of many local activities of the PTA and of sports leagues of area children and adults. Cotroneio also provided jobs for many Berkeley youths and donated to many civic and city organizations.

Cotroneio will be "fondly remembered by the many people whose lives he touched," stated the resolution. His wife Jean, and other members of his family were present to receive the council resolution.

Thus, the first chapter in Berkley's pizza history comes to a close. The second chapter, the story of Berkley's second pizza business, Sila's, will be the subject of a future issue of *The Museum Corner*.

The Museum Gift Shop

The museum gift shop has the perfect gift for that person with a Berkley connection. Selections include books about Berkley history, posters, banners, post cards and our Berkley Map prints

Coffee Mugs

Don't forget our coffee mug featuring the bygone restaurants of Berkley, including Dominico's. Restaurant mugs are available at the Museum, the City Hall and the Library for \$15 each.

Business Card-Sized Magnets

Our refrigerator magnets are \$1 each, or get all 6 for \$5. Available at the Museum, the City Hall and the Library



Visit Us

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museum@berkleymich.net

Hours: Wed: 10 AM till 1 PM
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Donate Items of Historical Interest

If you have artifacts or historical photos that you wish to donate, stop by the museum or email: museum@berkleymich.net. Items should be clean and in restorable condition.

Become a Member

Do you enjoy history and/or the preservation of historical artifacts? If so, we have a place for you on the Berkley Historical Committee. We are an official committee of the City of Berkley dedicated to preserving and promoting its history. We educate and engage the public in our efforts through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum. If you wish to become an active member of this committee, send an email to museum@berkleymich.net indicating your interest, or call 248-658-3335 and leave a message.

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Photos courtesy of Michael Cotroneio, Jr. Historical references include *The Daily Tribune*, *The Berkley Advance*, *The Detroit Free Press* and Michael Cotroneio, Jr.

The mission of the Berkley Historical Committee is to preserve and promote the history of the City of Berkley, Michigan, and to engage the public through the administration and management of the Berkley Historical Museum.