

# A little slice of history

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When she was 6 years old, Karen Dicesare had a weekly job: To walk down the block from her house on Willow Court to the SV Club at the corner of Spruce and Green streets and pick up a pizza for dinner. "My mom would give me a dollar," she recalled. "We had a standing order. They only made it on Fridays and it was the best pizza in town." The SV Club - a neighborhood fixture for decades - was run for almost 50 years by Emily "Mel" Ciesluk and her husband, John. The last pizza went out the door in 1997, but last Thursday night, the current owners of the bar, now called the Spruce Street Tavern, honored Ciesluk. Two original pizza peels, the long-handled wooden paddles used to pull the pies out of the brick oven, have been refurbished and engraved. One was donated to the Holder Memorial and one will hang on the wall of the Tavern.

"It's to honor Mel; she used them all those years," Pat Harrington said. He owns the Spruce Street Tavern with Tony Gannon and Shane Bufton. "We wanted to be sure there was a piece of Mel here for years to come."

Ciesluk's parents bought the bar in 1892 and for years also ran a bakery. Then one day back in 1951, Ciesluk's grandson Justin Lamb said Ciesluk tried an experiment of sorts with some leftover dough.

"She rolled it out and threw sauce and provolone on it," he said. "She brought it out to the bar and it was a hit."

"Pizza had just started to get popular," Mel said. "We made a couple and it just took off."

That was the beginning. For the next 46 years, people flocked to the SV Club for its famous Friday pizza. Dice-sare's family was one of the lucky ones - most weeks, the pizzas sold out early.

"On a good night, it was nothing to put out 200 pizzas," Ciesluk's son, Tony Ciesluk, said.

"There was a genuine brick oven - Mom was easily cooking 30 pizzas at the same time."

"She followed the same recipe for 46 years," Ciesluk's granddaughter and namesake, Emily Hisman, said. "Most weeks, she was sold out by early afternoon. It's heaven on a plate. Once you eat it, no other pizza is going to taste good."

The SV Club was the family business, and all of the family - and many of the friends - worked there.

"You had to get out of the way when you were working here," grandson Kevin Lamb said. "If you were in the way, you'd get whacked with the paddle [as my grandmother turned.]"

"She used to lift the pizza up with her hands, off the wooden paddle, to see if it was done," Hisman said. "She never burned herself."

"If you were a kid, you worked here," Matt Lamb, another grandson, said. "We all slung pizzas. I'd come down after school and it would take you two hours to make the boxes."

Family friend Jane Armstrong-Frantz said Ciesluk offered a little incentive, too.

"We'd meet here on Saturday mornings and wash the ashtrays and sweep the floors," she said.

"Any change you found, you could keep."

Many of the patrons of the Spruce Street Tavern have been going there for years, since the days of the famous Friday pizzas.

"I was down there the other night, sitting in the first booth and I realized that for four

generations, everyone sat in this booth," Don Kosiewski said. "I think of all the important decisions that were made over the decades - they talked about weddings, who had died, who was having a baby - it's amazing. And, of course, it was not just my family."

Armstrong-Frantz agreed. "The whole SV club was a neighborhood icon for generations," she said. "We lived across the street. My mother and Mel's grandmother were friends. Some people were here for four generations. How many times can you say families are fourth generation friends? I know it was a bar but it was a family place, people came here on Sunday with the kids, there was food, and shuffleboard, and you caught up on the week. When I came home from college this was the first place I came to, to catch up."

As part of last week's celebration, Mel's grandsons came by to reminisce and make some of the famous pizzas. The original brick oven, while still in the kitchen, is no longer usable, so the men cooked the pies two at a time in an electric stove. Although this meant they took longer to get to the tables, no one seemed to mind.

"It brings back such memories," Karen Dicesare said. "I've been coming here since I was 3 years old. I have had pizza here for as long as I can remember, and the pizza is awesome."

Matt Lamb acknowledged that there is a secret recipe, though of course he could not divulge anything further.

"Sometimes we'll make them and drop them off for friends," he said. "But every time we do that, Babcia gets one. That's the rule. Her favorite is the MOP - mushroom, onions and peppers," he said.

As to whether or not it measures up, he said, "She never tells us to take it back."

"They're not like the old-fashioned ones," Ciesluk said with a smile. "But they were good."

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