

Remembering Joe Pace

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It's a typical bustling Sunday at J. Pace & Son on Main Street, and Rico Colangeli wants his special cut of fresh sirloin steak.

Colangeli, of Medford, is a longtime customer of the Saugus Italian grocer, deli, bakery, caterer and hot-meals maker with roots tracing to the 1960s when Orsogna, Italy immigrants Nicolo and Rosaria Pace (pronounced "Pach-chay") worked in an Italian "Groceria" on Salem Street in the North End of Boston.

"Every week I come and get it," Colangeli said of his specially-cut steak. "They call it the 'Rico Cut.'"

Colangeli on New Year's Eve offered his condolences to the family of the Italian grocer's late owner Joe Pace Sr., the son of Nicolo and Rosaria who worked in that North End shop since age 9 and purchased it from the previous owner who became suddenly ill.

Through better than a half-century of slicing meats and cheeses, Pace helped build the North End mom-and-pop (small "like a closet," his grandson and namesake recalled) into a multiple-location, now more than 100-employee enterprise.

Pace, a Saugus resident, died after battle with cancer on Christmas Eve. He was 70 and leaves behind three stores (Saugus and two in Boston), a restaurant, Rosaria's, on top of the Saugus J. Pace & Son and a legacy of giving, hard work and full bellies for loyal customers.

Mr. Generosity

"My son Michael was in the (U.S. Army) 82nd Airborne Division and did two tours in Afghanistan and one in Iraq," Colangeli said. "When he came home Joe had a steak for him. He gave me a cake for my wife on her birthday. When my wife hit the Lottery, he gave her a cake."

Joe Pace's legacy of giving went beyond food. He gave dozens of loyal employees lessons of hard work — the “Joe Pace Education” his grandson called it -- and plenty of worthy organizations help when they needed it.

Pace helped support a Dana-Farber Cancer Institute fundraiser in 2016 that raised \$101,906 for the institution that treated his own cancer.

Pace was also a proud grandfather of four who told many stories of the old North End days in his home.

Quality products, customer relations

It's impossible not to associate Joe Pace Sr. with his beloved business, which up until three years ago had a presence in the North End at 42 Cross St. and now has shops in the Seaport District and West End in Boston in addition to the home base in Saugus.

Joe Pace Sr. was married to the love of his life, Angela, but he had mistresses in the form of those buildings that pumped out baked clams, arancinis (Italian rice balls), sold Italy-made pastas (like Pasta Di Stigliano) and had bakery ovens working overtime producing treats so sweet and thick a smell it permeates through the second-floor Saugus administrative offices.

Quality products is not the only thing that kept the business going, however. It was treating customers like Rico Colangeli like gold, almost as if they had a second home at J. Pace & Son.

“Rich or poor, he treated everyone the same,” said Joe Pace III, Pace Sr.'s 22-year-old grandson who is now director of operations for the business. “He went above and beyond for all customers. He had a huge, huge heart and was generous. He wanted to make customers feel important. He always encouraged them to never be afraid to ask for something off the menu.”

Pace III recalled the night before his grandfather died, while receiving chemotherapy treatments, the elder Pace's main concern was getting his hands on a pen and piece of paper.

“On it,” the younger Pace said during his eulogy at his grandfather’s funeral Dec. 28 at St. Patrick Church in Stoneham, “he wrote a list of his close friends and neighbors that he’d like me to deliver baskets, cookies and roasts to for Christmas Eve.”

North End icon

In a letter published on NorthEndWaterfront.com Oct. 2, 2014, Pace Sr. announced the closing of the North End shop at 42 Cross St., thanking his customers for patronage with a closing line of “Grazie Mile,” Italian for “thank you so much.”

But the thanks was reciprocal.

Pace Sr. and his North End shop for residents there was like a living, breathing historical tribute to days where grocers and customers were the backbone of hard-working, immigrant-laced neighborhoods like the North End.

Customer Lucy Pirkey wrote back on the site, “Joe, you were so much more than a businessman. There wasn’t a struggling family that you didn’t give extra tomato cans to, or extra pasta packages. We will miss your kindness most of all.”

Pace Sr. had a “knowledge of good customer service,” and that “brought you the success that you deserved,” customer Domenic Piso wrote. “You were one of the last links to our old North End which is quickly dying.”

Another North End customer, Marie Monte, wrote that Joe “will deeply missed here in the North End. You are one of the pioneers who made the North End what is was and still is, thanks to people like you who worked very hard to get where you are today.”

Fair, but firm boss

Pace III, during his grandfather’s eulogy, noted that his grandfather’s respect for others was something he learned from his own grandmother, Maria-Domenica. She would say to her grandson Joe, “Pepino, you need to be good to everybody. When people think of you, let it leave them with a beautiful fragrance, and not a fowl aroma.”

Pace treated his employees fairly, too. He was tough, but fair, the 22-year-old Pace recalled. Pace Sr. led by example because he could always be seen in his healthier days cutting deli meats and getting his hands dirty with anything the business needed.

His breaks were rare; on them, you could find Pace Sr. enjoying a mortadella, provolone and roasted red peppers sandwich on toasted scali bread.

“He was extremely fair but very firm,” Pace III said. “He would let his employees know when he absolutely needed something done. All he wanted was for them to show up on time for their shift, work hard and have fun doing it.”

Dozens of youngsters in and around Saugus got what his grandson calls the “Joe Pace Education.” It involved pushing people just enough and simply expressing the value of hard work.

“If he didn’t push those people, many of them would not be where they are today,” Pace III said. “So many people have reached out to me recently telling me about this. That they needed common-sense, hard-work lessons, and they got that education from my grandfather.”

Longtime employee Mike Martignetti, a 20-year J. Pace & Son veteran, is Joe Pace Sr.’s godson. The families are close: Martignetti’s parents came from Italy as well. They lived two houses away from each other when the Martignettis and Paces were in Medford.

“Joe was second to none, and there will never be another like him,” Martignetti said behind the deli counter as he scooped up two baked clams for a customer on New Year’s Eve. “He always took care of everyone else, even when he was going through what he went through (with his illness). It was always about someone else, always putting others first. If there were kids in line, he’d say, ‘Get those kids some cupcakes.’ Or he was always giving gift baskets to neighbors.”

Rico Colangeli was one recipient of the Joe Pace generous touch. He’ll never forget his chats with Pace about his son in the military overseas.

“Every time I came in, Joe would always ask, ‘When’s Captain Mike coming home?’” Colangeli said. “That’s the kind of guy Joe was. It wasn’t just a business here with Joe. I mean, you looked forward to seeing him.”

