

# NY restaurateurs to bring Italy to Bernardsville

**Jenna Intersimone**

Central Jersey Courier News

USA TODAY NETWORK – NEW JERSEY

For nearly 63 years, three generations of the Vitiello family kept the crowd at Queen Marie Italian Restaurant in Brooklyn buzzing, the kitchen line rolling and Frank Sinatra playing.

Since April, however, the doors of the Court Street staple — known to its large local following as “the Queen” — have

been shut.

But now, the Queen’s former general manager, Michael Vitiello, and his father and Queen co-owner Pasquino Vitiello, are bringing their culinary skills across the Hudson.

Michael, a Morristown resident, and Pasquino, an Oradell resident, plan to open Ristorante MV, a contemporary Italian restaurant, at the former location of Rudolph’s Steakhouse at 1 Mill Street in Bernardsville in late February.

“I lived and breathed the Queen. My family’s heritage is there and I put my life into that place. When it closed, I didn’t know what to do with myself,” said Michael, whose grandfather, Anthony Vitiello, opened the Queen in 1958 after immigrating to the United States from Italy.

“But I’m happy now because I found the way to carry it on. I can continue with my family’s legacy in a different location. Still, what we stand by is our

quality, our consistency and giving the proper experience of our food and everything we have in our hearts to our customers. It’s in my blood.”

**A 200-year-old space, transformed**

The Vitiellos are working on a major renovation of the 10,000-square-foot stone building, which was built in the

**See ITALY, Page 2LF**

# Italy

Continued from Page 1LF

1800s and has both a main restaurant with a bar and loft area, as well as a tavern with a separate entrance.

Although the building has changed hands throughout the years — it's been a horse stable, hotel, numerous restaurants and a comedy club — it's maintained an old-world ambiance. The Vitiellos plan to accentuate that while also giving it a modern touch.

"This building has an old-school heritage like we do — we're a product of the '50s and we handle our quality and service like we've been doing this for a long time," said Michael. "We also want to channel a contemporary, eclectic and art-deco edge to the existing space and bring out its natural beauty."

In the bar area of the main restaurant, Ristorante MV will include high-gloss cobalt blue walls, a copper ceiling, a white Carrera marble bar, 16 brass bar stools topped with cognac leather, and eight bar tables and booths padded with three-inch velvet cushions.

In the 85-seat main dining room, the restaurant's lighting will highlight the beauty of the stone, said Vitiello, and the original timber will be refinished. A prosciutto-aging room off the dining room will be backlit.

And amid wall prints of the rolling hills of Tuscany will be a 14-foot olive tree in the center of the room, surrounded by green velvet chairs imported from Italy.

The cutting-edge vibe will extend to the music, too.

"You think guys like us are just going to have Sinatra playing, but we are going to play up-tempo Italian pop so when you walk in, you can feel the energy," Michael said.

The tavern will be renovated, although it is currently open and mostly exists as it did under Rudolph's Steakhouse. Once the main dining room is open, that renovation will begin. It will include 40 bar seats and 50 table seats at full capacity. The plan is actually a homage to the history of the Queen.

"When my grandpa opened the Queen, he used every penny he had trying to build it," said Michael. "What saved him was having a contractor turn on the gas for the oven before the restaurant was finished, so he could sell 5-cent slices out of the window and help



**Queen co-owners Pasquino Vitiello (left) and Vincent Vitiello (right). Pasquino's son, Michael Vitiello, who was the general manager of Queen, is pictured center.**

PHOTOS COURTESY OF MICHAEL VITIELLO

finish paying for the construction."

Once both renovations are complete, customers will have the option to head to the main restaurant for a high-end experience or, described Michael, go to the tavern if they're looking to have spaghetti and meatballs with the children while watching the game.

## The Queen experience in Bernardsville

"When it comes to the food and the service, Ristorante MV will be almost identical to the Queen — our head waiter is even coming in to train everyone," Michael said. "Our service mentality is the customer is king. We're not pushing bottles of wine on you and everyone gets tap water. If you want bottled water, you ask. We're not stuffy like that, and that's what people appreciate about our service."

Just like at the Queen, everything will be made in-house at Ristorante MV, including every item in its bread basket, mozzarella made twice a day, pastas, desserts, hand-churned gelatos, sauces and stocks and butchered meats. Even the Queen's equipment — including the pizza oven — are coming for the ride.

"From start to finish, we're a scratch kitchen, and we use everything," said Michael. "For example, we save the bones we can't use from the veal legs and then once a week, we make a stock with them and reduce it to a demi-glace. All of our veal dishes have a tiny bit of that demi-glace, and it really brings out



**The dishes at the new Ristorante MV will mirror those at the Queen.**

the beauty of the flavor."

At the classic Italian restaurant, Michael recommends the mozzarella, made with a unique acid and fat content; the clams oreganata; and the veal — "the best money can buy," he said. It's known as being so tender that the Queen used to host a "No Knife Challenge," where New York City chefs were invited to cut the veal with only a fork.

He also recommends the secret menu items — although you'll only learn of those if a regular is kind enough to tell you.

## A fated find

But none of these dishes would be coming to Bernardsville if it were not for a specific chain of events.

Michael and his future father-in-law went to look at potential spaces for Ristorante MV and stopped by Rudolph's Steakhouse — which was not for sale — simply for lunch and a glass of wine. Inside, his future father-in-law said, "Would you ever think about buying this place?"

"Not in a million years," Michael replied. "This place is a castle."

But he decided to try. Wanting to approach the owner, who he assumed was the lone man sitting in the corner at the otherwise empty tavern, about a possible sale, Michael had a plan. He ordered an expensive bottle of wine, thinking the bartender would ask the owner where the bottle was. He also knew that due to the bottle's age, the bartender would probably break the cork, and the owner "would probably jump up to save the day." Then, a conversation could begin.

And that's exactly what happened.

The owner, Rudolph Hisena, and Michael began talking about Michael's search for a restaurant space, and Michael mentioned he would be open to purchasing Rudolph's Steakhouse. Ru-

dolph told Michael call him on Monday.

"Three months later, the bartender who broke the cork is an employee of mine and the owner and I had a great transition," Michael said.

## The future of the Queen

The five-year plan was that Vincent and Pasquino would close the Queen and Michael and Pasquino would open a new restaurant. Those plans were fast-tracked, though, after the pandemic hit.

Thirty percent of the Queen's clientele was the neighboring federal courthouse crowd, which came to a halt as court cases went virtual. And being on Court Street isn't ideal for outdoor dining.

"You would get a bus fume in your face," Michael said.

Now the Queen's fate is uncertain. Pasquino said that he and Vincent are exploring all options, including the including slim possibility of reopening when pandemic restaurant capacity limits improve.

Although Vincent is not involved with Ristorante MV, he remains close in the hearts of both Pasquino and Michael.

"I credit my experience in this business to my uncle and my father," Michael said. "And even though my uncle isn't with us in this endeavor, he's always with me in the back of my head with all of the restaurant and life lessons that he taught me."

With the pandemic ravaging New York, the Vitiellos wanted to open something closer to their own New Jersey homes.

"At the Queen during the pandemic, we did everything — we followed every single rule — but the city was just working against you in every way," Michael said. "I already dealt with everyone in Bernardsville — the health department, the fire department — and everyone has been so great. They want to see it work out. It's been a beautiful experience here."

**Go:** 1 Mill St., Bernardsville; ristorantevmv.com, 908-766-7979; opening late February

*Jenna Intersimone has been a staff member at the USA Today Network New Jersey since 2014, after becoming a blogger-turned-reporter following the creation of her award-winning travel blog. Contact: JIntersimone@Gannett.com or @JIntersimone.*