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Famed Detroit restaurateur Mario Lelli dies at 97

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Mario Lelli, who owned and operated a traditional Midtown Italian restaurant during Detroit's heyday, died Saturday at age 97.

Mr. Lelli opened Mario's Restaurant on Second Avenue in 1948 -- which remains in business 62 years later - - and operated it until he sold it in 1980.

"It was very traditional; it was old classic Italian food," said Mr. Lelli's nephew, Joe Pirrone, who grew up around the restaurant and waited tables there as a student. "There was no pizza. It was all the veal and the good steaks and everything."

Born in Genoa, Italy, in 1913, Mr. Lelli came to the United States as a child and worked in California before he came to Detroit in 1939.

That year, he and his cousin, Nerrio Lelli, opened Lelli's Inn on Woodward. Mario Lelli sold Lelli's to his cousin when he opened Mario's.

The restaurant was a hit with the business, union, theater and sports crowds. Among the regulars were travel host George Pierrot, broadcasters Joe Garagiola, Ernie Harwell and George Kell, and former Detroit Mayor Coleman A. Young. Michael Landon of "Little House on the Prairie," Lorne Greene of "Bonanza" and Nat King Cole are among the hundreds of celebrities who dined there over the years, Pirrone recalled.

"He knew every customer's name," Pirrone said. "It was very much old school when it came to service." The all-male serving staff was instructed: "You don't pick up a dish until everyone at the table is done."

The restaurant hosted legendary parties, such as one for Lee Iacocca when he was named president of Ford Motor Co. in 1970.

"He was a larger than life character," said freelance writer Molly Abraham, who writes restaurant reviews for The Detroit News. "It was just operatic the way he prowled around that dining room; you couldn't miss him."

"If he saw a waiter who wasn't doing the salad exactly the way he thought it should be done, he would take the two spoons and mix the salad himself."

Mr. Lelli's words were inscribed on the restaurant's menu. "We believe that the enjoyment of food is one of life's great pleasures," he wrote. "We believe that the true measure of success of a restaurant is the degree of esteem and pride gained in the guest's mind and heart."

After selling to the Passalacqua family of Carl's Chop House fame, Mr. Lelli bought and operated another restaurant, The Golden Eagle in Rochester, until he retired in 1996, Pirrone said. The original restaurant, Lelli's, later relocated to Auburn Hills, where it remains in business today.

Mr. Lelli loved cigars, martinis and red wine, but exercised regularly and swam a mile a day until age 85,

Pirrone said. He loved to read and travel and spoke English, Italian, Spanish and French.

Pirrone said Mr. Lelli had slowed down in recent months and was living with his son in Coldwater when he was admitted to a hospital in Angola, Ind. About three weeks ago. He may have suffered a stroke before he died.

Predeceased by his wife, Guerina, in 1992, Mr. Lelli is survived by his son, John, and daughter-in-law Amy; four grandchildren; and three great grandchildren. He is also predeceased by his son Mario Jr.; his brothers, Nello and Arthur; and his sister, Lillian.

Visitation is Tuesday from 6-9 p.m. at Price Funeral Home, 3725 Rochester Road, Troy. The service will be at the funeral home at 11 a.m. Wednesday. The burial will be private.

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