

ANTHONY BRUNO

Pizza Pioneer

By TEAGUE McFADDEN

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THE NON-DESCRIPT EXTERIOR of Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza in Fort Lauderdale cloaks the vibrant atmosphere inside. Though the pizzeria's large windows provide ample views, the sun-drenched palms fade, giving way to the mirage of a street corner in Brooklyn. With nine Anthony's locations, including ones in Fort Lauderdale, Boca Raton and Palm Beach Gardens, plus his legendary Runway 84, Anthony Bruno brings a bit of his New York experience to South Florida.

On this Friday afternoon, the house is packed and the volume of chatter elevated. In an untarnished Brooklyn accent, Bruno offers a clenched fist and a "Go Giants" to a man across the restaurant. Whether the man is a customer or friend is inconsequential. In

Anthony Bruno's world, they are one and the same.

Bruno's father began working in the restaurant business in and around Queens, N.Y., after returning from WWII. Young Anthony followed his father into the business, and in 1980, to South Florida. Two years later, the father-and-son team opened Runway 84, bringing authentic New York Italian food to the tropics.

The iconic eatery features an airline motif, a quirky leftover design bequeathed by the previous owner. On a typical Saturday night, you can find Bruno greeting guests, offering menu suggestions, or sharing a drink with friends. Celebrities, local and otherwise, flock to Runway. Dan Marino, a partner in the company, is a regular.

"Italians treat food as a religious experience," Bruno says. "It's a celebration."

Bruno serves "first-generation Italian-American" food, a combination, he explains, of old-world recipes and new-world ingredients, born from his family Sunday dinners in New York. "We'd have everything," he says. "Prosciutto, macaroni, Sunday gravy – and we'd be talking about what we would eat the next Sunday." Some of the most popular items on Runway's menu are forgotten classics, like tripe.

"People see that stuff and it immediately takes them back," he says. Bruno continues the Sunday dinner tradition at home with his wife Lori and kids Anthony, 22, and Tara, 19. No separation of personal and professional life exists for Bruno, and that's just the way he likes it. When asked what he does for fun, Bruno blithely responds, "I run a restaurant, what could be more fun than that?"

The walls at Bruno's restaurants are adorned with pictures of famous patrons and music icons. "When I went to pizza joints as a kid, they always had a jukebox," he says. "You'd hear everything from Sinatra to Jimi Hendrix to The Bee Gees. We try to recreate that here." Bruno selects all of the music – more than 1,000 tracks – played in his establishments. "Everything you see here is a representation of what's in Anthony's mind," says Ben Novello, Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza CEO. "He's created a culture."

Culture drives the success of Bruno's endeavors, the ingredient that sustains the uniqueness and quality of his fare. After 20 successful years with Runway 84, Bruno opened Anthony's Coal Fired Pizza with partner Michelangelo Mozzicato in 2002. Word spread quickly about the well-done pie, flash-baked in 800 degree coal ovens in four minutes flat.

Patronage flourished, and Anthony's commenced expansion. Bruno hired Novello to steward the expansion, preferring to concentrate on orchestrating the personality of his creation. His presence, understated and modest considering its enormity, remains the driving force behind what has become a brand. Bruno makes it clear, however, that the bottom line will never trump quality, asserting, "You're only as good as your last pizza."

