



IT'S BLAZE'S WORLD

The third generation owner of Steve's Sizzling Steaks in Carlstadt brings more than just great food to the table

By Brandon Goldstein

It's 1936. Your Ford sputters down Route 2, a dirt road that ended before the swamps of the Meadowlands began. You're hungry and have a hankering for a good steak and why not check out the new place on the block? You knew the place. It used to be Connie's Place, but Connie grew tired of the business. She wanted out, and a couple took it over. Heck, it's worth a try. There's nowhere else to eat on Route 2 anyway!

Fast forward to today, and that same building still stands,

only the surroundings are much different. The dirt road is now bustling Route 17, one of the main thoroughfares cutting unapologetically through Bergen County, stretching straight through those once daunting swamps, fueled by the housing boom that made the county the densely populated community it is today. Restaurants, shops, and megastores dot the highway, stretching as far as you can see in both directions. Yet two things remain the same: One, Blaze

Damiani is running the place, keeping it in the family for three generations. Secondly, the steak is really damn good.

When Steve Venturini and his wife Mary heard that Connie's Place was coming up for rent back in 1935, they seized the opportunity. It was a carpentry accident in 1926 that had taken Steve out of the building business searching for a new opportunity.

The couple took the place over on New Year's Day, 1936. Connie threw her last New Year's Eve party the night before, and Steve, Mary, and their children cleaned up the mess so that they could officially open.

Three years later, as word spread around Carlstadt that this little highway stop was dishing out some of the best steaks in the area, Mary and Steve officially bought the building for Connie for a whopping \$732.14.

As the couple began building their business, they realized they needed a niche. They decided to create a "sportsman club" to make their restaurant stand out. An avid fisherman himself, Steve is rumored to have fished with the likes of Ernest Hemingway and one George Herman "Babe" Ruth. One morning as Steve walked into the restaurant, he noticed Mary had hung his rifles and fishing rods from the ceiling of the restaurant, giving the place the sportsman vibe Mary sought, much to the chagrin of Steve.

Nowadays, the old rifles and fishing rods still remain, accompanied by stuffed game, a marlin, pictures with signatures of athletes and celebrities who have stopped in at Steve's, amongst many more relics only a business thriving for more than 80 years could have.

Steve Venturini was a larger-than-life figure. Customers would come in as much for the food and drink as to see Steve who survived not one, but two airplane crashes.

On February 5, 1952, Steve was on a National Airlines flight that had just taken off from Newark Airport headed for Miami where he was going to spend the week fishing. The plane crashed in Elizabeth killing 30. Although injured, Steve survived. He carried his friend, Charles Griffin, to safety and returned into the tangled remains of the airliner to help others. It was an explosion and severe head injury that stopped him.

Ironically, a few years later, Steve was in a prop plane headed to Cuba where he was to go fishing with Hemingway, and that plane went down, but Steve survived yet again. His legend only grew, and it wasn't a surprise to see Yankee Manager Billy Martin frequenting the joint, grabbing a steak with Steve.

When Steve would go on his fishing and hunting expeditions, it was his daughter Marie who would take over for him. As a child hanging in the restaurant, she had watched her father concoct cocktails. When she turned 21, she filled in as a bartender for the first time. A true pioneer, she was one of the first female bartenders in all of the county.

When a girlfriend introduced Marie to a local drummer by the name of Joe Damiani, the two hit it off. When she was 27, they married. He soon joined the family business, and in 1987 Joe Damiani was inducted into the "Bartender Hall of Fame"

"I know my customers lifestyle. I know what they do, I know their kids. We talk. Sometimes I don't have the time to talk. But in this business, you always have to. That's what sets restaurants like ours apart from the rest. With these corporate places opening everywhere, there's no personality, no sense of loyalty. We don't operate like that,"

by Bartender Magazine.

This all leads up to what this story is truly about: Blaze Damiani.

"One of my earliest childhood memories is my grandmother in the kitchen at Steve's, my father behind the bar, my mom waitressing, and my grandfather running the whole show," says Blaze, now the patriarch of the Steve's Sizzling Steaks family.

We are chatting at his beach house in Mantoloking this past summer. His belief in hospitality translates well from within the walls of Steve's to his bayside home, as I'm met with a cold beer, a ride on Blaze's boat, and unsurprisingly, delicious (and perfectly cooked) steak.

Blaze is everything you'd expect every restaurant owner to be. Outgoing, warm, able to juggle several tasks at once, and always smiling for his guests. Despite our interview, he still has a house full of people, but in a way only a host who has perfected his craft can, he makes us all seem like we are the most important people there. His in-laws, friends, kids, wife and me. We are all here, all demanding a bit of Blaze's attention, but he handles the calamity with an innate calmness, making it clear that hospitality is truly in his blood.

Sitting with Blaze, you can tell he's always thinking about Steve's. With a family business, there's always that fork in the road where the newest generation can either improve upon the work of those before them, or sit stagnant and see where it takes you. Blaze isn't one to sit for very long.

Looking at him, you can tell he's always calculating. How can he add to the customer experience, keeping the tradition of a great, inexpensive steak alive in a time when meat is expensive? Within those calculations though, the answer is never about cutting quality to increase profits.

Blaze is the best combination of a kindhearted businessman there is. He knows there's a middle ground to making his customers happy and still providing for his family - a trait lost on our money hungry, do-whatever-it-takes business world these days. Sitting with Blaze is refreshing, because at no



point in time does it ever feel like he would screw anyone for his own good.

That might come from his days as a kid. Having attended the same Carlstadt school as his parents and grandparents before him, Blaze would see kids with their lemonade stands, and thought it wise to offer more than just a little lemonade.

Blaze and his friends would build a mock-carnival, putting those stands to shame, offering prizes and a wheel of chance, bringing the community to him and never disappointing. Steve's Sizzling Steaks is Blaze's childhood carnival.

Some of Blaze's earliest memories took place within the hallowed walls of Steve's. He still remembers being just five years old, sleeping on a pillow atop a beer box in the back room, catching a nap while his parents worked. He remembers when the Meadowlands Sports Complex was built in the Seventies, as the highway to nowhere became the highway to Giants Stadium and now, MetLife. Try to get a table on game day. Just try it.

While in college at Bergen Community and then Fairleigh Dickinson, Blaze was still managing Steve's and having plenty of fun. His knack for entertaining has become legend among those who know him well, and many more have probably passed through a Blaze Damiani party once or twice in their life without even realizing. It's Blaze who usually remembers them, though.

"I know my customers lifestyle. I know what they do, I know their kids. We talk. Sometimes I don't have the time to talk. But in this business, you always have to. That's what sets restaurants like ours apart from the rest. With these corporate places opening everywhere, there's no personality, no sense of loyalty. We don't operate like that," Blaze says.

As important as customers are to Blaze, the staff at Steve's is considered family. "I've had people working with me for decades. Take Anke, for instance. A waitress at Steve's for 28 years, her brother George is a cook in the kitchen. Her mom was a meat cutter and her three children have all worked at Steve's, and that's just one example of many."

Blaze has worked about every job there is within the restaurant. While you'll rarely find him in the kitchen these days, his bright presence is always felt throughout the restaurant.

When it comes to the menu, Blaze has a "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" mentality. Of course, that menu has 80 years of proven success behind it. It has expanded throughout the years, but never too drastically, adding something here or there, adding trendy items as they emerge. "My wife and I were in South Beach a few years ago, and while she was shopping I grabbed a glass of wine and see this Tomahawk Ribeye on the menu. I was curious and had to try it. It was delicious. When I got home, I spoke to my meat guy, Lou, and he goes, 'I have em, but they're expensive.' Six years ago, this South Beach restaurant charged \$42 for it. When I returned, they were \$58. I sell mine for \$40. It is important to me to give my customers the opportunity to have this great steak without

paying a crazy price for it.”

That’s the man Blaze is. It’s what makes him a great father to his children, Ava and Will, and an amazing husband to his wife, Jen. He cares about everyone, to the point where his genuine sincerity is almost too sincere to believe. But it’s authentic.

Blaze is grilling us filet tips as the sun begins to set over Mantoloking Bay. By now, we are a few beers deep and have conversed for hours, intermittently disrupted by kids running around, neighbors stopping by on their boats to say hello, his in-laws with some great off the record anecdotes about Blaze of their own. Whether within the walls of Steve’s or 70 miles south at his vacation home, Blaze runs the show, and takes it upon himself to make sure everyone has a great time.

For most guys, they have that one thing that is their pride and joy. Whether it be a boat, their business, fishing, etc. For Blaze, it’s every aspect of his life. His wife, his kids, the restaurant, his lifelong friendships and the many happy customers he and his family have served throughout the years, they all just add up to this beautiful life Blaze and his family have built, and it’s clear Blaze couldn’t be more grateful.

Blaze’s positive energy is contagious. When once upon a time Blaze’s neighbor came up with the moniker “Blaze World,” it instantly stuck. Blaze is not the center of attention but the curator of the party, and with generations of hospitality in his blood, he was destined for the part. After all, it’s Blaze’s delicious, beautiful world, and we’re all just living in it.

