

Pastazza closing, but its local food legacy will live on

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Lynn and Fred Berman opened their first restaurant in 1984. They had five tables and served food fresh from their garden. They can seat nearly 100 people at Pastazza, and while food isn't directly from their garden, much of it is sourced from local farmers. Photo by Ryan Wynne

By Ryan Wynne

Do you think food can bring about world peace? To an extent, Fred and Lynn Berman did, and they still do, which is one driving force that has kept them in the restaurant industry for 27 years.

“In a world filled with conflict and dissension, the one commonality we share is a need for food,” Lynn said. “To sit down at a table with our own family creates a forum for communication. To share food with those who have a dissimilar political outlook,

religion, or cultural background, generates a curiosity, and hopefully, a tolerance for each other. Food is always our one common denominator.”

Now, after nearly three decades providing a venue for mealtime peace talks, the veterans are hanging up their aprons and closing the doors to their Barkley Village restaurant, [Pastazza](#), Nov. 27.

Fred and Lynn may be leaving the restaurant industry, but their legacy will live on through a now blossoming local food movement they helped pioneer in Whatcom County. Not only did they help establish a Bellingham farmers market and contribute to organizations trying to boost local buying, they also used their restaurants to put hyper-local buying into practice.

In 1983, Fred and Lynn took an A-frame ski cabin in Glacier and turned it into a restaurant with a local food focus. They opened Innisfree in 1984 and much of the food served there came straight from a garden growing outside the restaurant and from other local producers.

Sue Sayegh worked at Innisfree and has continued to work with Lynn and Fred at Pastazza as a pastry chef and office manager. She has been with them for 19 years, but is still outranked by Anne, the pasta maker, who has worked with them for 25 years.

“We don’t have really high turnover here at the restaurant,” Sayegh said. “We have people here I have worked with since we opened.”

Lynn and Fred don’t just treat employees like workers, but like people with personalities and independent lives, Sayegh said. An example of this is the closing-time dinners they used to share with employees at Innisfree. Once the restaurant closed, one person would cook while others cleaned up and then they would all eat together.

“It was a really great way of us getting to know each other — just really personalizing our relationships,” Sayegh said. “My working relationship with Lynn and Fred is something I wouldn’t trade for anything. They run their business with their own personal values.”

Sayegh said she remembers when Fred would deliver food to the Innisfree kitchen that was straight from the Berman’s garden. The food was so fresh it was still dirty.

Innisfree’s menu would change each week to reflect foods that were in season, and used a seed-to-table model, meaning the restaurant had a hand in both producing and preparing the food it served.

“I think they set a good example and if there was anything I think they could do better it would be to blow their own horn a little more,” Sayegh said.

Fred said Inissfree was the first restaurant in Whatcom County to use the seed-to-table model, and it was the first nonsmoking restaurant in the county.

Most of the restaurant's customers were people from Vancouver, B.C., and Seattle with vacation homes in the area, Lynn said.

“What we heard from people locally is, ‘If you were closer, you guys would be swamped,’” she said.

So they did move closer and opened Pastazza in Barkley Village 14 years ago.

Fred and Lynn's commitment to serve seasonal, local goods didn't end with the move to Bellingham and that commitment, which sometimes eats into their bottom line, has made them a model for supporting local producers. Pastazza is one of a handful of businesses Sustainable Connections uses to highlight and share best practices, said Derek Long, executive director of [Sustainable Connections](#) — Fred was on the founding board of that organization.

“They have served as a resource to both farmers and restaurants on the advantage and benefits of supporting one and other,” Long said.

Fred and Lynn did so, he said, by “sharing what they do, and why it's important for the health of our local economy and environment.”

Long said he doesn't have numbers to show what kind of effect Pastazza has had on local producers, but has been told by farmers the restaurant has always been an account on which they could rely.

When Fred and Lynn decided to open [Pastazza in Barkely Village](#), the business center was home to several local businesses. There was an educational toy store and a coffee shop with a piano.

Pastazza thrived when it first opened.

“Oh my God, the first five years were crazy; they were busy,” Fred said.

The restaurant was hopping and after a year and a half in Barkley Village, Lynn and Fred expanded their seating capacity. They also put in a wood fire pizza oven and started two more restaurants: the Book Fare in Village Books and Pizzazza in Fairhaven, both of which they have since sold.

Eventually, though, locally-owned businesses in Barkley Village began closing their doors for various reasons, Fred said, and more corporations and franchises moved in.

It was around this time that business at Pastazza started slowing. However, Lynn said the slowdown may not be absolutely attributable to the change in tenants. Fairhaven was growing then and the downtown revitalization was in full swing.

“The last two years have been hard, really hard with the recession,” Fred said.

A year and a half ago, Fred and Lynn put Pastazza on the market. They wanted to retire from the restaurant industry, and wanted to keep Pastazza going for their employees and because they wanted to see the restaurant they had built live on.

It was also at that point they signed an agreement with their landlords, the Barkley Company, which stipulated the company could assume Pastazza’s lease under certain circumstances.

Fred said they came “this close” to selling the business, holding his fingers about an inch apart. The business didn’t sell though, and while Fred and Lynn didn’t say under which circumstances the Barkley Company could assume their lease, the lease was terminated.

John Arrigoni, [Barkley Company](#) leasing agent, said the agreement with Lynn and Fred was mutual. They wanted to retire, he said, and the Barkley Company had a new user for the space lined up.

“They ran a great restaurant down there,” Arrigoni said. “They have been a good operation and they have had a lot of people come through their restaurant.”

Lynn said the two are grateful for all of the friendships they have built with customers, farmers and employees, of which there are many. For a few years, when they owned all three restaurants, they had about 60 employees, Lynn said.

To celebrate all of those relationships and their 27-year restaurant careers, Lynn and Fred will have a farewell festival from 1 p.m. to 9 p.m. Nov. 27, after which they will close their doors to the public.

“We want to go out with a bang, not a whimper,” Fred said.

On Nov. 28, they will hold their last closing-time employee dinner, which is for all current and former staff only.

After that, Lynn said she will probably pursue nonprofit work.

“After I wake up from my month-long nap,” she said.

Fred will continue his work as the small farm program coordinator for the Washington State Department of Agriculture, which he has done for nearly five years.

And while they will no longer cook for the public, they will likely continue to believe in the power of food.