

Owner of landmark South Baltimore restaurant dies Rallo's stood on Fort Avenue since 1941

By Frederick N. Rasmussen, *The Baltimore Sun*, July 7, 2011

Vincent Mario "Vince" Rallo, a former banker who in retirement took over Rallo's Restaurant, a Locust Point landmark since 1941, died Thursday morning of lung cancer at Gilchrist Hospice Care in Towson.

The longtime Homeland resident was 79.

Rallo's, in the 800 block of E. Fort Ave., was established by Mr. Rallo's father, Louis Rallo, an immigrant from Sicily who settled in Baltimore in 1910.

The restaurant was known for its generous breakfasts that included scrapple, an old-fashioned menu staple, as well as bacon, sausage, corned beef hash and sizzling ham.

There were heaping portions of beef or chicken stew, lima bean and pea soup, fried crab cakes, chili con carne, Spanish omelets, braunschweiger sandwiches, and sour beef and dumplings.

"It's been an institution in South Baltimore forever," said Baltimore City Councilman William H. Cole IV. "I've eaten breakfast there every morning for 17 years. I arrive at 8 a.m., and my scrambled eggs and iced tea are waiting for me."

He recalled Mr. Rallo as being a genial host and a lively conversationalist.

"There are not many places left in Baltimore like Rallo's," he said.

Joe DiBlasi, a former city councilman, is another regular.

"We had many, many political and campaign meetings and fundraisers there over the years. I think I introduced William Donald Schaefer and Barbara Mikulski to Rallo's," he said. "I've been there thousands of times in the last 30 years, and I always looked forward to Fridays, which was flounder day."

Mr. DiBlasi said he visited Rallo's two or three times a week.

"If I didn't have time to eat, I'd just drop in to talk to Vince, and he loved telling me what to do, and I'd tell him, 'Why don't you run for City Council,' " he said, with a laugh.

Mr. DiBlasi added: "He was a generous behind-the-scenes guy. He was a great man who always did a lot for the community. He was loyal and dedicated to the South Baltimore community and will be sorely missed."

The restaurant was a throwback to another era — a diner in a rowhouse — but Mr. Rallo

had been trying to sell the corner building for the past few years. He had scaled back the hours, ending dinner service.

It is a place where the waitresses know the orders of the regulars.

Pictures of old Baltimore adorn the walls, along with snapshots of Mr. Rallo posing with city politicians for whom the restaurant was a must stop, whether they were running for office or already elected. Mr. Schaefer celebrated his 75th birthday with breakfast at Rallo's.

It was a favorite for city police officers, longshoremen, City Hall workers, reporters, judges and railroad workers from the nearby CSX Riverside yards.

Teal-colored barstools were filled with workers from Domino Sugars getting off their overnight shifts, while others dined in blond-colored booths or at tables that were similarly decorated.

"It was a motley crew. You could never stereotype who was going to be there," Mr. Cole said with a laugh.

But as the neighborhood edged toward gentrification in the early 2000s, Mr. Rallo adapted, adding bagels, cream cheese and salmon to the menu, while not abandoning such standards as split pea soup, Western omelets with cheese, or plates of soft butter and bread from F&S Maranto Inc., the Pearl Street baker.

"Industry has virtually left Locust Point," Mr. Rallo said in a Baltimore Sun interview in 2000. "The longshoremen who used to frequent this restaurant have been trickling off since 1984. We've had to nurture the residents of the neighborhood."

Of the newly added items to his menu, Mr. Rallo said, "That's not exactly a longshoreman's taste."

In a 1987 Evening Sun interview, Mr. Rallo described his restaurant to a reporter as being "a dinky little place, but we love it. We're even attracting Federal Hill yuppies."

On Thursday morning, there were plenty of tears as regulars arriving at the restaurant for breakfast were shocked to learn that Mr. Rallo had died at 7:20 a.m.

Bonnie Geho, a Locust Point native who has worked as a waitress there for 25 years, hugged customers as she fought back tears.

"I met my husband here and raised my kids here," she said. "I never did a lot of eating here because I was always busy waiting on customers."

Mr. Rallo had a wide circle of friends that extended far beyond Locust Point, she said.

"No matter where I went — I could be in Westminster, for instance — and when I'd tell people that I worked at Rallo's, people would say they knew Vince," she said.

"Vince was always concerned for his customers," she said.

It was Mr. Rallo's custom to go from table to table or sit for a moment and shoot the breeze with diners as his wife of 49 years, the former Angela Giamporcaro, stood behind a glass counter filled with candy and gum to handle the cash register.

Another quaint custom was the handing of bills to diners without any prices on them. Mr. Rallo or his wife would later tote them up at the cash register as customers prepared to depart.

The eating habits of many of Rallo's customers were so familiar that waitresses never offered them a menu. They what they wanted and ordered it for them.

Missy Martin, who became a regular after moving to Locust Point eight years ago, confessed to having a passion for Rallo's jumbo cheeseburgers and lima bean soup.

"Rallo's is like Marconi's, Haussner's or Martick's. This is a Baltimore institution, and you're not going to find places like them around here anymore," she said.

When Ms. Martin told Mr. Rallo she was marrying Thomas Carney, who teaches history at the University of Baltimore, he offered her some sage advice.

"He told me to find a good Sicilian and not marry an Irishman," she said.

On Tuesday evenings when Ms. Martin's husband was teaching, Mr. Rallo would keep the restaurant open until she got there. "He'd then turn off the outside lights. He just didn't want me eating alone on Tuesdays," she said.

Gary Baykowski, a retired city worker and South Baltimore native, was finishing an egg sandwich and sipping a cup of coffee Thursday morning at the restaurant.

"I'm a coffee addict, and I love Mr. Vince's coffee. It's the best," he said. "I've been coming here for 40 years. Now I come here just for breakfast, and it's a real treat. I see Mr. Vince and people I've known for years in here."

Joyce Fitzgerald Agresott, who works at [Oriole Park at Camden Yards](#), said she has lived her entire life in the 700 block of E. Fort Ave.

"I was born and raised here in 1956. We used to come in here before school in the morning to buy ice cream. Rallo's has been here forever and a day," said Mrs. Agresott, who was accompanied by her young granddaughters visiting from West Virginia. "Vince always had a kind word for everybody."

The restaurant opened at 6 a.m., and Mr. Rallo would arrive an hour earlier.

"He always had to be here when the doughnuts arrived," said Mr. Baykowski.

Sonny Smothers has been cooking at the restaurant for the past 25 years.

"Vince always treated me OK, and he was easy to get along with, but we had our days and by the next day it was all over and forgotten," he said.

Mr. Rallo decisions to raise prices and put the restaurant up for sale were difficult for him, Ms. Geho said.

"He wanted to keep prices low so families could still afford to come here. He really struggled over that. I knew putting the restaurant up for sale was hard for Vince. Now, with Vince gone, it's going to be harder," she said.

Mr. Rallo was born and raised in Locust Point. He was a 1950 graduate of Mount St. Joseph High School and earned a bachelor's degree in 1954 from Loyola College.

He worked at Maryland National Bank and Mercantile Safe-Deposit and Trust Co. until 1981, when he took over the restaurant from his two brothers, who were retiring.

He told The Baltimore Sun in 2000 that he couldn't bear to see the restaurant leave family hands.

Mr. Rallo, who worked in the restaurant as recently as two weeks ago, had been diagnosed eight months ago with the cancer that took his life.

He enjoyed painting ships and still lifes in oils and watercolors.

Mr. Rallo was a communicant of the Roman Catholic Cathedral of Mary Our Queen, 5300 N. Charles St., where a Mass of Christian burial will be offered at 10 a.m. Saturday.

In addition to his wife, Mr. Rallo is survived by two sons, Raymond Rallo of Towson and Mario Rallo of Sunny Isles, Fla.; a daughter, Lisa Rallo Szumla of Sykesville; a brother, Salvatore Rallo of Catonsville; and three grandchildren.