

Mott Haven's Venice Restaurant: a successful family business

by Sondra Levin

From the island of Ponza off Italy to the south Bronx.

That's the start of the story of a family business, the Venice Restaurant, which serves Italian food in Mott Haven.

The development of the business is an American success story of immigrants who came to this country because of opportunities and through hard work created a good business to support their families. With its success, the business has also played a role in building up a local community.

Now the Venice Restaurant, at 772 E. 149th Street, is celebrating 50 years as a family business in the Bronx. To mark the anniversary, the restaurant has invited elected leaders, and some of its regular customers, to a ribbon-cutting and celebration planned for noon on June 20 at the restaurant.

The building, which dates back to the early part of the century, and the restaurant, have been labeled landmarks by the Bronx Overall Economic Development Corporation (BOEDC).

A long-time sole owner who is currently one of three partners of the business, Stefano (Steve) Scarogni, described how the business is a family one with all the owners related. Steve, who lives with his family in Throgs Neck, said that all those people who have run the business are either related as uncles, cousins or nephews. The owners come from what Steve describes as the "beautiful island of Ponza." He proudly displays a photograph of the island that appears to be one of those sparkling Mediterranean islands with its white buildings, clear waters surrounding it and brilliant skies.

On June 5 Congressman Jose Serrano presented to Congress a tribute statement about the restaurant and its 50th anniversary. The statement, which was

placed in the Congressional Record, outlines the restaurant's history. It explains the three families who were involved since 1951 in the business have been the Ronca, Feola and Scarogni families.

Fred Guarino, who ran the business until 1958, opened the Venice Restaurant, which was first located on the opposite corner of its present location, in 1951. From 1958 until 1962, cousins of Guarino, Giovanni Ronca and Silverio Migliaccio, managed the business. Ronca continued to operate the restaurant until 1975 when another cousin, Steve Scarogni, and his brother-in-law Elio Feola, assumed control.

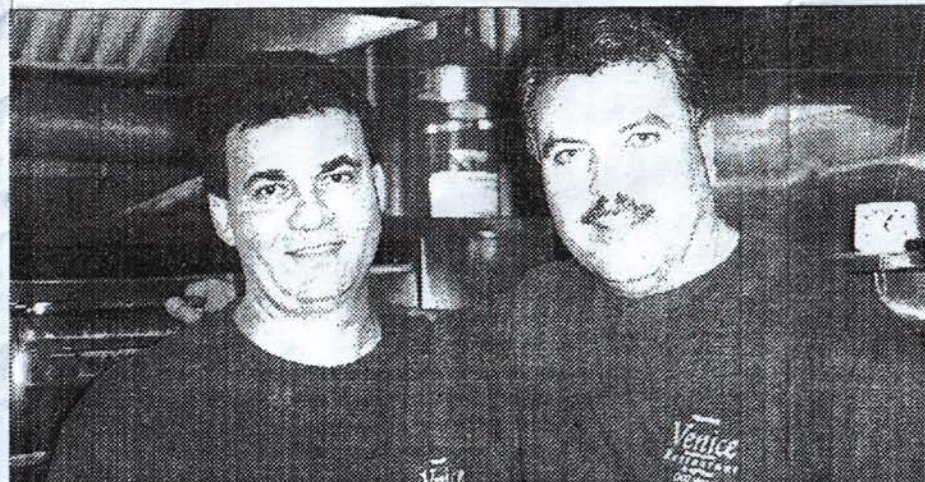
Steve came to this country in 1966 when he was 14 years old, and he began working at the restaurant at age 23. Elio was one of the restaurant's original cooks, and taught Steve to cook.

The 1980s were difficult years for the family. In 1983, Elio, 37, died from a massive heart attack while driving to

work. He left his wife, Silvia, and three children. Steve, who had a wife and three children of his own to care for, had to help his sister Silvia's family. Steve had to lead the business forward alone, managing the business, buying food and doing the cooking.

He decided to move the business from its original location when the landlord raised the rent. Steve purchased the building across the street in 1986 and opened the restaurant at the new building in 1988. He also bought the parking lot through a city auction to use for his customers.

Steve wanted to ease his workload so he decided to expand the ownership with two new partners in 2000. Francesco Feola, who is Elio's son, and Philip Vitiello, who is Steve's nephew through marriage, joined Scarogni as partners. Philip has worked at the restaurant since he graduated from Cardinal Hayes High School in 1976.



Two of the three partners who own the Venice Restaurant (l-r), Philip Vitiello and Steve Scarogni, were seen last week in the restaurant's busy kitchen. The third partner who is not shown is Francesco Feola.

— PHOTO BY SONDRALVIN

The family experienced another tragedy when Steve's sister, Silvia, died at age 49 in 1998. She worked for many years part-time at the restaurant.

When asked what the secret of success is for the restaurant, Steve said the main factors are good food and hospitality, including making customers feel at home.

He explained, "We came from Europe when things were not that good. We all came with zero; we were poor but eager to work." He further explained that many immigrants from his part of Italy went into restaurant or construction work. He pointed out that many immigrants lacked the educational opportunities that young people have today, and there were few fields open to them.

The restaurant is well known and highly respected. Former customers include Paul Newman, who came into the restaurant when starring in the film, *Fort Apache, the Bronx*; Lucille Ball, Edward Asner and Danny Aiello.

Steve said that the business has prospered in the south Bronx and will continue there. While urban decay problems occurred in the 1970s and 1980s, he said that the area has gotten much safer in the last decade. In 50 years of the operation, the restaurant has not had any crime problems.

Walking into the spacious restaurant at 149th Street and Wales Avenue, a visitor notices the evidence of a strong restaurant: the fact that most tables are occupied. The restaurant seats almost 100 people. A closed circuit provides security for their parking lot.

The restaurant, which is open seven days a week, gets a full house of customers for lunch and dinnertime meals. The restaurant also runs a large takeout service.