

Roma Wasn't Built in a Day
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Sometime back in the Dark Ages, when the Newport Freeway had barely been completed and the Garden Grove not even started, I uprooted my little family from the relative civilization of Anaheim and moved them to the orange groves of north Tustin. When one moves to the freedom of the frontier, one leaves behind certain amenities. In this instance, the one my children particularly missed the most was the luxury of a good Italian restaurant within a few minutes of the house. My children felt that this was especially unfair since I was still practicing in Anaheim and so had the opportunity to eat at lunch whatever was not available at the evening meal. (This was in the days when I actually ate food with caloric content for lunch.)

In an attempt to quell the growing mutiny in the ranks, I agreed to take the boys to a movie on Saturday afternoon. That is, I dropped them off in front of the theater with money for their tickets, and enough candy to get sick. When I returned later to pick them up at the Tustin Theater (now converted to a dinner theater) I found that the boys were less excited about the movie than the restaurant they had seen across the street. Even if the name "Roma D' Italia" had not clued them in, the large rotating sign in front (still there and rotating) promised pizza and Italian food. Of course they had to tell their mother the good news, so I had little choice but to give it a try that very evening.

I realize that restaurant reporting is really the province of Leah Franklin, elsewhere in the *Bulletin*. However, this is less a review than a report of the evolution of a restaurant, so I hope that Leah will forgive this intrusion into her territory.

In this, the age of the fragmentation of the family, it also gives me a very nice feeling to be able to write a story about a business that kept a family together.

Of course, on that first evening, the Corea family had not yet entered the picture. At that time the Roma "D" Italia was owned by one Sam and his wife — I've forgotten their last name. There were four tables and a half a dozen booths, mostly empty, but the food was fantastic. The quality of the food, we soon learned, was due to the one employee, Jerry Cortina. Jerry, a short little man with a limp from polio in childhood, had come west from New Jersey and/or New York a few months earlier. Over the next several months, the tables became less empty and the food continued to be excellent. Then suddenly there was a drop in the quality that was obvious. Jerry was gone and Sam was doing the cooking.

"Not to worry," Sam assured us. Jerry would be back. In fact, Sam was going to retire and Jerry was going to buy the Roma D' Italia.

Jerry did indeed return, but he couldn't swing the whole deal by himself. He found a partner, Dominic Corea, a carpenter with a sharp mind for business. Together they bought out Sam, who made ready for a long-planned trip to Italy, to the town of his birth. Unfortunately, Sam died suddenly and never did get to make the trip. Fortunately, he had sold the restaurant to Dominic and Jerry while it was still a going concern.

Over the next several years, business boomed — as much as it could boom in the crowded quarters. Jerry's reputation became well established, particularly among the local physicians. Dominic learned all that Jerry had to teach about the restaurant business, but unfortunately Jerry

did not learn what Dominic had to teach him about business and common sense. Finally, in 1970, they came to a parting of the ways.

Jerry decided he had to go on to bigger and better things. He didn't, but that's another story.

For the Roma "D," fate was kinder. It now was truly a family business. Gradually, some of Dominic's wife's recipes became melded in with Jerry's, with good results. One by one the children came to work in the restaurant: First came Tina, the eldest daughter who started off as a "busboy," then became waitress, then cashier, and who now, as Dominic's health has failed, is manager. Next came Louie, who climbed the ladder from dishwasher to cook's helper to head chef or kitchen manager. Finally came Teresa, who was not even walking when the family first became part of Roma D' Italia. Teresa is now more or less the assistant manager, but the most important thing she manages is not to get in the middle when Tina and Louie disagree,. Along the way, I should have mentioned, Tina found time to get married and, two years ago, have a baby.

Until this year I would not have written this story. It was hard enough to get a table as it was. There were still the four tables and dozen booths that there had been the first night we ate there. Only now they were always full. The crowd waiting for tables either had to trip over the take-out patrons or go outside and wait in their cars.

In January of 1982, the Roma "D" celebrated with a face-lifting that included an increase in seating capacity to about four times its previous level, a separate counter for take-out, and even an expanded parking lot. Even so, there are still nights when there is a waiting line for a table.

Naturally, prices have increased over the years as costs have risen, but the Roma D' Italia is still a family restaurant. That is, you can still afford to the whole family there.

While the kids are munching pizza or twisting spaghetti, you can try the fettuccine Alfredo or the manicotti. (Mrs. Corea makes the delicate crepes used for this dish.) There are also veal and chicken dishes on the menu, and recently Louie has resurrected some of Jerry's truly gourmet recipes which involve clams, mussels, or prawns (all fresh). These vary from night to night and are announced on a black board near the front door. If your diet and your conscience will allow, you can finish off the meal with a piece of Tina's homemade rum cake. Of course, all the bread is baked on premises daily.

The Roma D' Italia is located at 611 El Camino Real in Tustin, just across the street from Tustin Square. Dress is informal. Unfortunately, they don't take reservations. You can call them, however, at 544-073 and they will let you know whether or not there will be a wait for table.

Please don't ask me why "Roma D' Italia," which seems to be a redundancy. Only Sam knew the reason for the name and he took it to the grave with him.