

WALLS OF FAME  
Frank Pellegrino Jr.  
and patrons,  
photographed  
at Rao's in  
New York City.



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A legal tussle between co-owners (and cousins) Frank Pellegrino Sr. restaurant where many would love to eat and very few can get a table. But Pellegrino's son, Frank junior, has taken the Rao's experience to

and Ron Straci has brought storm clouds to Rao's, the fabled Harlem family as the place turns 120, its patina—equal parts garlic and glamour—endures, while Las Vegas and L.A. At transcontinental tables, ALEX WITCHEL reports

# No Place Like Rao's



When Frank Pellegrino Sr. walked into Rao's on a Tuesday night recently, wearing a black blazer, white shirt, gray slacks, gold bracelet, and signet ring, he led with his black velvet smoking slippers. He took a Chivas on the rocks off the bar, seated himself outside the restaurant's front door on its small cement patio, at the corner of East 114th Street and Pleasant Avenue, in Manhattan, and lit a Parliament 100, ready to greet his guests in style. As he has been doing five nights a week for the past 22 years as the co-owner of Rao's, Pellegrino was entertaining at home.

He didn't wait long. A group of men arrived, and the first one embraced him. "You look great, Frank," he said.

"I feel good," Pellegrino answered.

"You know who you look like?" the man asked.

The 72-year-old Pellegrino beamed. "Richard Gere?"

His admirer looked puzzled. "No. Peter Lawford!"

Pellegrino considered. "I'll take it," he said. "Enjoy, guys."

They were certain to; the fact that they are among the few people in America who will ever eat here practically guarantees it. Since 1977, when Mimi Sheraton awarded it three stars in *The New York Times*, Rao's, with only four tables and six booths, has been among the toughest restaurant reservations in the country.

For the uninitiated, Rao's has been at this corner in East Harlem, an Italian neighborhood that was even larger than Little Italy back in the day, since 1896. (And if you're looking for the safest corner in Manhattan to park your car, look no further.) This year marks the restaurant's 120th anniversary. It began as a saloon and is still in its original one room (slightly remodeled after a 1995 fire), whose paneled walls are festooned with Christmas lights and photos of Frankie Valli and Frank Sinatra. There is a bar at one end, a jukebox along the wall, and seating for about 60. It looks like the

finished basement that belonged to the most popular kid in high school, class of 1962.

Known by its regulars as the Joint, Rao's serves Monday to Friday (dinner runs about \$75 per person, cash or check only). Typically there are no reservations, just table assignments, which were designated decades ago by Pellegrino Sr. and his aunt Anna Pellegrino, who owned the place with her husband, Vincent Rao. (It was named for his father, Charles.) After Anna and Vincent died, in 1994, Pellegrino Sr. and Vincent's nephew, Ron Straci, a lawyer, became co-owners. One table each night belongs to Straci, who is 81. Some customers come weekly, others come monthly, quarterly, annually, or only at Christmas. When any of the 85 original "owners" die, their families will often inherit the table.

On their appointed night, diners arrive when they like, and the table is theirs for the duration. If they can't come, they either give it to family or friends, sell it as a donation for a favorite charity, or, rarely, turn it back to the house. Which means that if you want to get in you have to know someone who knows someone who knows someone else. Which is how Pellegrino got his nickname, Frankie No.

Some of Rao's regulars are connected—to show business—which is how Pellegrino was cast by Martin Scorsese for *GoodFellas* (see the cigar-smoking chef in the cooking-in-prison scene), along with five other Rao's regulars; he went on to play an F.B.I. bureau chief on *The Sopranos*. Bo Dietl, the private investigator who began his career as an East Harlem cop and was granted his weekly table in 1977 (the big one, up front), joined him in *GoodFellas* and shot his scenes in *The Wolf of Wall Street* with Leonardo DiCaprio here. Through the years you could find Keith Richards, Billy Joel, Celine Dion, and Rod Stewart singing along with the jukebox until all hours. Also Jimmy Fallon and Gloria Estefan. Jay Z shot his "D.O.A. (Death of Auto-Tune)" video here. When Hillary Clinton ran for the Senate, in 2000, she came for a late dinner, and the Secret Service locked the door from the



**DINNER THEATER**  
 (1) President Bill Clinton breaks bread with Thomas Kean and Jon Corzine as Frank Pellegrino Sr. (standing) regales them, 2003. (2) Rao's matriarch Anna Pellegrino Rao at the restaurant, 1993. (3) Rao's co-owners Ron Straci and Pellegrino Sr. outside the restaurant, 1995. (4) Opera singer Michael Amante wows the clientele, 1998. (5) Pellegrino Jr. and Sr. in Hollywood, 2015.

outside. Donald J. Trump ate here years ago, his daughter Ivanka more recently. She sent a handwritten thank-you note.

Unless requested, there are no menus at Rao's. Staples such as seafood salad, lemon chicken, and super-size meatballs are served family-style. The food is homey and most often delicious; Rao's marinara sauce, sold retail through the family-owned Rao's Specialty

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Foods since 1991, is a historic cornerstone of the kitchen's success. Next month marks the publication of the fourth Rao's cookbook, *Rao's Classics*, written by Pellegrino and his 46-year-old son, Frank. Pellegrino Jr. is the managing partner of the Rao's that opened at Caesars Palace, in Las Vegas, in 2006 (350 seats, which includes the outdoor terrace; come and get 'em) and also the Rao's

that opened in Hollywood, in 2013 (100 seats; ditto). New York remains the beating heart of the empire, the man-cave mother ship that abhors the world of celebrity chefs and blogging locavores. As Dietl says, "It's like walking back into the good old days."

**The Joint**

Some of those days were good; some were hard. Charles Rao bought the saloon in 1896 from the George Ehret Brewery. Customers arrived with tin pails; the beer was sold directly from the bar's taps. Charles died in 1909, and his brother Joseph ran the place until his death, in 1930. Vincent and his brother Louis became operating owners then, keeping the bar open

during Prohibition. Neighbors made wine in their cellars and pumped it into Rao's basement through a hose. It sold for \$1 a bottle.

Louis ran the restaurant until he died, in 1958, when Vincent took over. At that point it was primarily a steakhouse, with some Italian dishes, but, by 1974, business was so brisk that his wife, Anna, joined in to expand the Italian side of the menu. Vincent, who was born in the house next door to Rao's, was raised there and married there. He died there, at 87, in 1994. Anna died that year as well. The two nephews have owned the place ever since.

Pellegrino Sr. sat on the patio and sipped his Chivas, his gold turtle cuff links flashing. In *Rao's Classics*, we learn of his obsession with the turtle: "With its impregnable exterior, methodical and plodding style, resilience and pluck (be careful when he snaps), the turtle is his avatar." Given senior's background, it makes sense. The undisputed ringmaster of Rao's, who glad-hands like a pro and makes it all look easy, he is also the guy who came up the hard way, working every day since he was 16, in the kitchen, behind the bar. He readily admits, "I'm no CONTINUED ON PAGE 208

## President Obama

I suspect I'm able to do better out of this office.

**GOODWIN:** You mean, having had this office.

**OBAMA:** Having had this office has given me this incredible perch from which to see how the world works. The power of the office is unique and it is a humbling privilege. With that power, however, also comes a whole host of institutional constraints. There are things I cannot say. There are things that...

**GOODWIN:** You mean now, but you will later.

**OBAMA:** ... that I cannot say, not out of any political concerns, but out of prudential concerns of the office. There are institutional obligations I have to carry out that are important for a president of the United States to carry out, but may not always align with what I think would move the ball down the field on the issues that I care most deeply about.

## Rao's



CONTINUED FROM PAGE 173 genius." But he doesn't need to be. Senior believes in growing talent; loyalty means everything here. He has a long memory, and he's not afraid to use it. He's been married to his wife, Josephine, who is junior's mother, for 47 years.

"I was born in this neighborhood," he recalled. "My father was a truckdriver, my mother a seamstress. In my 20s, I was a struggling singer, playing nightclubs and cruises. In 1972 my aunt called to say they were exceptionally busy; Uncle Vincent needs help. I came for two weeks and stayed 44 years."

He got up to greet Dick Grasso, the former head of the New York Stock Exchange, and his family on their way inside. Grasso and his son, Rich, came right back out with Dino Gatto, Rao's executive chef, and one of the busboys. It was 6:15, early enough for them all to pitch quarters. Whoever gets the quarter closest to the wall wins. Rich won. "This place is like a throwback," Pellegrino Sr. said contentedly. "My grandfather used to take me to a place like this. In the old days, we had an awful lot of characters here, neighborhood characters."

And some of them were gangsters, right? The Genovese crime family made Pleasant Avenue its headquarters for years. He shrugged. "Obvi-

**GOODWIN:** It must be so freeing, I think—because you now have this foundation to do the stuff you want to do, but also you're going to become more of a human being without this.

**OBAMA:** That's the hope. And, look, I have no doubt that there will be moments as the next inauguration approaches where I'll feel melancholy or nostalgic.

**GOODWIN:** And leaving all these people.

**OBAMA:** And the team that you build here, the family that you build here, is powerful. But there is a reason why George Washington is always one of the top three presidents, and it's not because of his prowess as a military leader; it's not because of the incredible innovations in policy that he introduced. It's because he knew when it was time to go. And he understood that part of the experiment we were setting up was this idea that you serve the nation and then it's over, and then you're a citizen again. And that "office of citizen"

ously the place has a history," he said. "Perhaps that's more to do with 70, 80 years ago than now. All I have here are hardworking people."

Mostly. Except for the arson that gutted Rao's in 1995 (and if anyone knows who did it, he's not telling), the only unfortunate incident during senior's tenure came in 2003, when he asked Nancy Strober, a young singer, to perform "Don't Rain on My Parade" along with the jukebox. Among the men drinking at the bar that night with bulges in their jackets was Albert Circelli, "a made man" in the Lucchese crime family, who was not pleased. He made insulting remarks. Louis "Lump Lump" Barone, a numbers runner and a guy from the neighborhood, shushed him. Circelli threatened him. Barone shot him with his .38-caliber Smith & Wesson revolver and killed him. "I lost face," Barone, who died in prison three years ago, said in his confession. "I had to defend my honor." The incident inspired a *Law & Order* episode called "Everybody Loves Raimondo's," starring Dietl as the shooter.

Pellegrino Sr. held out his arms. "That had nothing to do with us," he said. "One guy had words with the other guy. Believe me, it came as a total shock." A group descended the stairs, including a woman in a skintight dress with sky-high heels; think blow-up doll with a pulse. Glad for the distraction, Pellegrino rose to greet them. "Hi, sweetheart, how are you?" he asked while shaking the men's hands. She kept going.

Smooth as silk, he followed them inside to start working the crowd, which was now three-deep at the bar. Nicky Vest, the beloved bartender named for his extensive collection of, you guessed it, vests, is 83 now and works only three nights a week. His understudy was busy serving what junior calls the "9:30 people." They are known to the house, having phoned ahead and gotten permission to wait and see if the regulars will finish by 9:30 so they can take their tables.

remains important, but your ability to let go is part of the duty that you have.

**GOODWIN:** It's as important as taking hold of the office. That's part of our democracy.

**OBAMA:** As important as taking hold of the office is letting go of the office. And they're of a piece—it is an expression of our fidelity to the ideals upon which this nation was founded.

**GOODWIN:** I agree. There will be perks that you'll miss, I'm sure.

**OBAMA:** I will miss Air Force One. I will miss Marine One.

**GOODWIN:** I think I told you the story about Eisenhower, that he had not personally dialed a phone call for so long that when he finally was out of the presidency he picked up the phone and he hears this buzz, and he said, "What's this buzz?" It's the dial tone, Mr. President. [Laughter.]

**OBAMA:** I will say that, having a couple of teenage daughters, I'm a little more plugged into [laughter] technology than maybe Ike was. □

Some nights they get lucky; other nights they just drink. Each table was filled now, not a star in the bunch. But when anyone walked through the room, the intensity of the stares felt practically physical. No one wants to miss the chance to say he was here when so-and-so was, too.

Pellegrino Sr. was back outside, having a smoke. This clearly would not be a jukebox night. When he's in the singing mood, his first song is "My Girl," and it goes from there. Instead, he went back and forth to the bar, where his lawyer sat; Straci had been in earlier, chatting with Gatto in the kitchen. He left without coming outside to say hello.

This recent trouble in paradise stems from Rao's Specialty Foods, a lucrative retail business separate from the restaurant that, among other items, produces marinades, dressings, and sauces (including its best-selling marinara), based on recipes developed by senior and Anna Pellegrino. In July, senior and the other shareholders of the company filed suit against Straci and his wife, Sharon. Essentially, the suit claims that Mrs. Straci, the company's chief executive officer, was receiving buyout offers but rejecting them without notifying the company's board or shareholders, because it would mean her leaving the company. The complaint alleges that she did entertain offers from private-equity buyers who would agree to let her stay on as C.E.O. but who would likely pay less for the company. It's one big familial mess. Senior refused to comment on the suit. By phone, Straci said only, "Hopefully it will all work out." That was before he and his wife countersued. When I called him for an additional comment, his phone had been disconnected.

"Frankie and Ronnie, I hope they settle the sauce thing," Dietl said. "Just take the money and live happily ever after. But even this little mix-up doesn't take away from the beauty and the happiness of that restaurant."

A man approached to shake Pellegrino Sr.'s

hand. "I loved the store in Vegas," he enthused. "The food was terrific there; I took my son and grandson." The Vegas kitchen is run by a 32-year-old African-American woman named Fatimah Madyun, who started at Rao's as a sous-chef. The customer went on: "My youngest son is in L.A.; can he get in there?"

"He can get in," senior assured him. "A year from now, no. Have him call Frankie."

"I looked for Frankie in Vegas, but he wasn't there. He was here."

Once the man left, Pellegrino Sr. sat down and turned his face to the evening breeze: "You know what the good news is? The good news is they look for us."

### Unto the Son

Frank Pellegrino Jr. is different from his father. He does not call random women "sweetheart." He does not actively avoid telephones, either cell or landline. Unlike senior, who says he only knows how to use a ballpoint pen, junior is proficient on e-mail. Sometimes he copies his mother on his e-mails, which, let's face it, is every mother's dream. Junior does wear smoking slippers, just with jeans and a crisp white shirt. He wears his hair in a ponytail and smokes American Spirit Blues. He started helping out in Rao's at 12. Along the way he attended the School of Visual Arts, started his own graphics company (now defunct), and had a daughter, Annie, now 19. He also opened the 200-seat restaurant Baldoria in New York's Theater District and managed it from 2000 to 2009, so when Caesars Palace came calling, he knew what to do. "Without my son," senior told me, "I would not have expanded, nor could I do it without him."

Since they opened Rao's in Hollywood, in 2013, junior, who lives in Las Vegas, travels back and forth. On the Tuesday after my night at Rao's in New York, I sat with him at one of the marble-topped smoking tables in the front of the Hollywood restaurant, which served as the Hollywood Canteen during World War II. The sleepy block—Seward Street, off Santa Monica Boulevard—is filled with postproduction studios, but the Pellegrinos liked the counter-intuitive setting, feeling it mirrored the restaurant's remote location in New York.

"You're late," junior said, politely, as a man approached, flustered. They shook hands. It turned out he was a waiter. "Traffic was out of control," he said apologetically. It was 6:15.

Dinner service began at six. (He was a model of promptness, however, compared with the busboy who arrived at 6:45.) Junior just waved him indoors. Through the years, he has honed a somewhat priestly demeanor, the all-seeing yet unflappable antidote to his excitable, dramatic dad. But father and son are inextricably bound, body and soul, so anyone mistaking junior's stillness for a lack of muscle learns his error quickly.

Granted, tonight was slow. This Rao's—like the one in Vegas—is open seven days a week, and, while Fridays and Saturdays are strong, it's the Sunday Gravy, the traditional meat-centric feast that every Italian immigrant family grew up with, that has proved most popular. (The recipe is in the new cookbook.) Nicholas Pileggi, a New York regular who co-wrote the screenplay of *GoodFellas* and wrote the book on which it was based, said in an e-mail, "The Sunday Gravy is fabulous. They only make 20 servings, so I order in advance. For me, Rao's L.A. has the same kind of safe, dark feel that comes with 100-year-old New York joints such as Luger's. Amazing in a city where you cannot escape the sun."

"L.A. is a bit more of a challenge than I anticipated," junior said, smoking. "There was some skepticism here that we were capitalizing on the name, and people had some grand expectations. I'm not sure we met the hype. We have regulars here, like New York, once a week, once a month. And our New York regulars, whenever they're in Vegas or L.A., they're here. It really is a family place, but it takes time to manifest. It doesn't happen overnight."

A man exited his car, came over, and shook junior's hands. "I'm here to support Johnny," he said on his way in. That would be Johnny Roast Beef, an actor perhaps best known for his inglorious end in *GoodFellas*. Two words: pink Cadillac.

The Beef, also known as Johnny Williams ("I'm born in the neighborhood," he assured me), relocated after that movie's success. When the Hollywood Rao's opened, senior hired him to be something of a host. Inside, Williams gave me a tour of the pictures of himself on the wall. He is a mountain of a man who plays the requisite thugs and bookies, yet there is an unexpected sweetness about him—as if a cement mixer became animated by Casper the Friendly Ghost. "I just did an episode of *Ray Donovan*," he told me,

"and I shot a short film with Maggie Gyllenhaal. I'm always working, thank God." He shook a few hands, gave out some business cards, encouraged a woman to bring her mother next time. "We're old-fashioned word-of-mouth here," he said. "With senior, you tell him Wi-Fi, he thinks it's the Chinese restaurant down the block."

By 9:30 the restaurant was mostly empty. But on the rear patio, a long table was set for 16. "A big part of my upbringing working in the restaurant," junior recalled, "was that every night, around 11, my aunt and uncle would prepare dinner. Our family meal was after service. Some of the most interesting people I ever met sat at that table." His friends moved from the bar to the patio and took seats along with a number of staff. The Beef held up his glass: "Saluti tutti!" Everyone toasted. Platters appeared with seafood salad, mozzarella and peppers, stuffed clams, meatballs, lemon chicken, scampi, penne arrabiata, grilled vegetables, spicy sausage, sliced porterhouse, and roasted potatoes. The wine was plentiful, the conversations open and warm, about parents, children, marriage. Caroline Potterat-Pellegrino, junior's wife of one year (though he's known her forever; the story is epic), was with him, along with her grown son. Surveying the table, junior said, "I feel like we're in a TV commercial or something."

It was Rao's 2.0. Which stood in stark contrast to the original. At the end of my night in New York, the restaurant called its car service for me at 11. Pellegrino Sr., along with junior, who was in from Vegas, took seats at Dietl's round table up front with six other men. Dean Martin sang "Ain't That a Kick in the Head" on the jukebox as junior served from a platter of fusilli with cabbage and sausage. The eight of them closed ranks and dug in. They were hungry in the grim way men are hungry after they work a long day. Eyes down. Silent. Most likely waiting for me to get out so they could talk—about the lawsuit, perhaps. From the back of the place someone sang along with Dean, hoping to entice senior to join in. He wasn't playing.

The car arrived and senior escorted me out. He took a roll of bills from his pants pocket and peeled. "Take her home," he instructed the driver. "When you're done, come back for me."

He went back inside to sit with his people, shake his head, shake his fist, eat his steak. Like yesterday. Like tomorrow. □

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