

Serving it up Family Style

By: Cami Reister

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Florence Foti-Smokler had given up hope of reopening Florence's, the authentic Italian restaurant her mother started here in 1989. After losing her lease at Thornton's Landing mall last year and failing to get a zoning variance to move to another location, she took her equipment out of storage and sold it, deciding to be a full-time mother at home with her two children Alyssa 8 and Michael 3.

"I really in my heart thought I wasn't going to reopen." She said.

But Foti-Smokler, 35 made that comment sitting in the middle of her new restaurant in Connell's Shopping Plaza at 456 Daniel Webster Highway, where she and her second-in-command Janet Grubenskas have spent every day since May preparing for their grand reopening on Tuesday.

"I'm overwhelmed." She said near tears. "It's very emotional. People have been so supportive." She found out about the new location in January only a few weeks after she sold her equipment. She said it was a very difficult decision, but by the end of February she knew what she had to do.

"Part of me really died when I closed the restaurant," she said. "I really felt that if I didn't do this, I would hate myself for the rest of my life and regret it." The restaurant is more than a business for Foti-Smokler, it's a continuation of her family's tradition and heritage. She got her start in the original Florence's Restaurant in Boston's North End, which her parents opened in 1974 and still run.

Her mother, the original Florence, opened the Merrimack location with the help of her son, but it didn't take long for the work of two restaurants to be too much to handle and when her brother lost interest Foti-Smokler took the helm. "My mother said, 'Go up there, you'll be like a boss'" she said. "I think of that every time I wash a window or scrub a toilet."

Manual labor is what has filled Foti-Smokler's 15 hour days since she signed the 10-year lease on her new place at the beginning of May. With an eye for detail and a need for cleanliness, she and Grubenskas have been knocking down walls with crowbars, cleaning grease traps, scrubbing faucet fixtures with a toothbrush, and hand-painting lighting fixtures to ensure the exact desired color.

Foti-Smokler's new location, which seats 30 in the bar, 76 in the dining room and has a 30-seat function room, has been the site of several unsuccessful restaurants over the years. The most recent sign to come down was Café Rendezvous. "There's been so many restaurants in here people tell me its cursed," she said. "But I don't think I would have signed a lease if I didn't think I would make it. I think this place has more visibility than the old place."

Visitors to the site may not recognize it as the home of the previous establishments. She added a wall to separate the bar area from the dining area, and photocopies of Italian currency decorate the top of the bar. Framed posters of Italian scenery and sites decorate the walls. Each table will feature black and white checked tablecloths with a red overlay.

People can celebrate the re-opening of Florence's Restaurant at an open house today from 1 to 6PM. A ribbon cutting ceremony will be held at 3p.m. The restaurant will be open for regular business as of Tuesday. And as a reopening gift from her parents a mural covers one whole wall depicting Santa Maria della Salute in Venice. Foti-Smokler said the same artist decorated the walls of her parents' restaurant in Boston. The gift meant a lot to Foti-Smokler, especially since her father, Joe Foti, expressed initial reservations to his daughter's desire to reopen the business.

"He realizes how difficult the business is and he doesn't want it for his own children," she said. "And I understand that, I don't want it for my kids. Also, it's a big chance. I believe he's very proud of me, but doesn't hand out compliments."

Foti-smokler said her regulars will recognize the menu offerings, although the design is a little different. It still has her personal recommendation, the Veal Salti in Bocca, stuffed with proscuitto and mozzarella, sautéed with fresh mushrooms and ham cubes in a marsala wine sauce.

Foti-Smokler said that much of the wait staff is new, but Grubenskas was there for the first opening of Florence's and she also lured a former cook away from his job at the Bedford Village Inn to run the kitchen alongside her. Kirk Perry, 24, who studied at the New England Culinary Institute in Vermont, used to work next to Foti-Smokler's mother. He said he was glad to come back to Florence's.

"Florence instills a great deal of loyalty," Perry Said.