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Last call for kugels at Joan & Ed's

By Bret Silverberg Special to the Advocate



Deli owners Joan and Ed Sanderson.

Mezuzahs, menorahs, kiddush cups and tzedakah boxes adorn the walls; the deli counter is stocked with latkes and knishes and kugels; and a line nearly stretches out the door. Such was the weekday lunch scene at Joan & Ed's Deli in Natick. Come June 21, the restaurant will be empty.

After 16 years in Natick – 33 years in business, and nearly a century-long legacy – Joan and Ed Sanderson are closing their deli.

The sorrow in Joan and Ed's faces tells the story. Faced with competition from chains and burdened by rising taxes, insurance and other expenses, the Sandersons decided they couldn't afford to keep the doors open.

"There's an anti-small business attitude we feel in this thing," said Ed, who is 67, a year older than Joan. "If I could have hung on I would have."

He keeps track of the restaurants in the Golden Triangle, the large retail district that straddles Natick and Framingham along Route 9. Of the 60 restaurants in the area, he said, all but 11 are part of chains.

In a sense, the Sandersons are born restaurateurs. Ed's grandfather, Morris, opened Sanderson's Creamery in the then heavily Jewish Blue Hill Avenue neighborhood of Dorchester in 1922. He later teamed up with other creamery owners to buy cream cheese and pickles in bulk and eventually open the National D Stores wholesaler cooperative. First National Stores bought the cooperative during the Great Depression, and the Sanderson family was out of the restaurant business – until Joan and Ed took the plunge.

The Sandersons met in Brookline in the 1960s. They were big fans of the legendary Jack & Marion's, a Jewish deli that once was a mainstay of Coolidge Corner.



The deli when it was in Framingham (above) and today in Natick.



After a stint in Vietnam, Ed, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, cooked in various kitchens in the Boston area. In 1977, the couple opened their own deli in Framingham's old Shopper's World.

Joan recalled the day her husband told her about the restaurant. "After I fainted, I said 'OK, if you think we can do this,'" she said.

The Sandersons moved to the current Sherwood Plaza location in 1994. Reform Jews, they serve traditional "kosherstyle" dishes.

"We've tried to maintain our deli atmosphere," said Ed. "We don't want to put Italian dishes in. We do knishes, we do blintzes, we do kugels. We do corned beef and chopped liver."

Mindy Sanderson knows the menu up and down. The couple's daughter has been working at the deli since she was 6. She's done every job there at least once. Now 38, she said the deli is among the last of its kind. "We're a true family restaurant," she said.

Ed broke the news to his staff at a June 10 morning meeting and posted signs announcing that Father's Day, June 21, Joan & Ed's would close its doors for the last time. Later that afternoon, the information was still sinking in.

"It's devastating," said Al Disessa, general manager of the restaurant for the past five years. "I'm going to miss [Joan and Ed]. When you're here and you see them every day - you work with owners. There's no corporate."

"I loved coming in here, I loved the people, my customers," said waitress Leslie Camara, her voice cracking. "This was my reason to get up in the morning."

Shocked patrons stared at the sign on the door announcing the closing.

"We didn't even know," said Betsy Merullo, 65, who came in with her husband, Bob.

The Merullos have been dining at Joan & Ed's since it was simply known as the Deli in its Framingham incarnation. "We're going to truly miss it," said Bob Merullo.

"It's one of those things where if you're in the area you go to it," said Alan Jensen, waiting in line for a table during the lunch rush.

Aside from the ambience, some customers said they would miss the dishes that kept them coming back.

"I'll miss the hot pastrami sandwich," said Debbie Berger with her daughter Nicole. "She'll miss the egg salad."

The Sandersons look forward to spending the summer in their home in Moody Beach, Maine, and time with the friends and family they rarely could see because of their seven-day-a-week work schedule. Still, for them, the future is wide open.

"I really don't know what's next," Ed said. "It's sad."

Jane Shapiro, former president of Temple Beth Am in Framingham, will miss the "tasty" food and especially the catering. "The big question is where do we go now."

Dawn Swann contributed to this story.

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