

Then we take numbers

By Alex Kowalski

It is pouring “gatti e cani,” as they would say in this part of the city, the air so wet that storefront windows look like they are melting as sideways sheets of rain splash onto them. Freezing wind blows the downpour parallel to the sidewalk, and the usual Saturday night crowd of theater-goers and tourists is completely absent from the streets of this walking city. But venture up to one of the windows with a glowing yellow sign above, wipe away a circle in the condensation and look inside, and there are dozens of people lining the walls of the store interior, sipping on espresso and pointing out which of the thousand baked goods they’d like to try. Surely they’ll have a cannoli.

For there behind the windows, wedged between hundreds of other Italian eateries on Hanover Street in Boston’s North End, sits Mike’s Pastry, the venerable 62-year-old bakery and café and King of the Cannoli, full of life when all else is dead from the cold night’s rain.

Through Mike’s doors, a rainbow of Easter baskets wrapped in cellophane hangs from the ceiling, covering up the water stained boards. A horseshoe-shaped glass case crammed with cookies; ricotta and lemon pies; the cannolis; éclairs; biscotti; marzipan sandwiches, some with tomatoes and cheese, others with ham and eggs; Italian candy, torone; chocolate shaped into spring lambs; braided breads; and cakes in pastel-hues attracts hungry eyes. The gelato case is sweating from the humidity, and smells of licorice, vanilla, coffee and wet clothes fill the store along with the customers’ constant clamor.

“Anthony,” a man says bending forward to the glass, “would you look at all this stuff right here? Amazing. Look at the cannolis. I told you this place was popular for a reason.”

“Oh my, there’s three tables that just opened!” another person exclaims, “Grab them quick!”

Another man with hair dripping down to cover his glasses pushes through a crowd of people three rows deep toward the counter and says over the chatter, “Are you taking numbers?”

“Not tonight,” shouts back one of the 10 or so employees in a blue shirt from behind the case who serves the onslaught of orders. “We ain’t that busy.” The man with glasses looks surprised. How could they not be busy when all 50 seats are filled? The employee tugs at a string dangling from the bottom of a bronze orb that hangs down from the ceiling like a fishing bobber. He uses it to tie up a box of lobster tails and continues, “You shoulda been here yesterday when it was warm for once in March. Line out the door. Then we take numbers.”

Yet they could always take numbers because the pastry shop, operated by the same man – 85-year-old Mike (of course) Mercogliano – since 1946, is always packed, vibrant regardless of the weather or the time of day, all because of a six-inch pastry.

There’s something about the lowly cannoli, perhaps the satisfying crunch of the shell contrasted with the sweet, creamy filling, that makes it stand out from all the other colorful baked goods in the store and keeps Mike’s business pumping, rain or shine, night or day. The \$2.50 treats (cash only) have made the place a Boston landmark when the North End, home to almost as many restaurants as people, has seen storefronts change with the seasons.

“It’s because of the family cannoli recipe,” says Angelo, one of the employees. “We make everything from scratch, including the shell – that’s the secret. We make a lot and we sell them all.”

The recipe's inventor, Mike, still comes into the shop, but he no longer bakes. Suffering from hearing loss and short on words, he sits alone at the back of the store in a closet-sized office and manages the business.

In his younger years, however, he managed to build his bakery into the kind of place that has found its way into any food related discussion, whether it be in cooking magazines, at family parties or around the boardroom table in office buildings.

Businessmen, including former president Bill Clinton, stop at Mike's whenever they're visiting Boston for work. They'll likely order a dozen of the tube-like cannoli, choosing between yellow cream, chocolate cream, chocolate moose, Florentine, honey-nut, chocolate chip, pistachio or the classic ricotta fillings. And at Logan Airport where they recently made an exception to allow the creamy cannolis through security despite their illegal non-solid filling, everyone recognizes the businessman's carry-on: a white box with clunky blue writing and a blue crown (they are the kings), wrapped in white and blue striped string.

"Those one won't get through the gate check," says an airport security inspector, "We'll eat them first."

Knowledge of Mike's has spread all over the city.

But the businessman has also brought the treats across the country. The shop now sells the cannolis online. It has developed assemble-your-own cannoli kits, as well, complete with all the ingredients, so they can be prepared to stay fresh for a longer time as they travel throughout the states.

Back at Mike's, it seems like nothing, not even a tempest that brings all other shops to a standstill, will stop business.

“Ah, I cannot wait to eat this,” says a girl outside under an umbrella holding one of the tubes up to her mouth, her hair plastered to her face. “Actually, I know it’s raining, but I’m going to take a bite right now.”

The cannoli is too powerful.

