

City Beat

There are eight million stories in my albums. This is one of them...

New York City's Guffanti's restaurant was founded in 1892 and was described in 1930 "the most famous Italian restaurant in all of New York." 274 Seventh Avenue was the address. The *New York Times* wrote about it a lot. It was run by Joe Guffanti, from Lake Como. In 1900, he was described as owning a "small establishment for the dispensing of food and drink," but those circumstances must have changed, because the pictures of Guffanti's' interior show a quite spacious, elegant place. The original had a saloon up front and the dining area in back and the whole place was "dingy and dark." The food, however, was renowned and "unique, for nobody else knows how to concoct the strange dishes that are prepared there, and Joe never loans out his receipts for cookery."

Joe seems to have been an exacting, fussy man. There was an exact hour for lunch and an exact hour for dinner. Food was served at no other times. There were only six to eight tables, and in the center of the dining room were two pool tables! Otherwise, the room was unadorned and the furniture in bad repair. The clientele was mainly Italian, but also included businessmen, reporters, detectives and actors, including John Barrymore, Al Smith, Lillian Russell, Diamond Jim Brady and John Philip Sousa. A party was once thrown here attended by a high-school-age Ira Gershwin.

Things had changed by 1920. An account of that year mentioned that Guffanti's was no longer "modest" but "a thing of sports and automobiles and six courses." Dishes were still "delicious," but "judgment in quantity as well as quality was [not] in evidence." There was "a heaping platter of the best spaghetti that ever was, enriched by a red sauce that cannot be surpassed in Italy itself."



Domenick Caserio, a former busboy from Turin, married Guffanti's niece Mollie Lomasney in 1908. He became the owner of the Manhattan restaurant in 1935; Guffanti must have sold it to him. In 1948, the place was still going strong. Noted gourmand Lawton Mackall wrote "Such spaciousness! Such fanciness! Such old-time substantiality! One dozen large oil-painted panels of views of Italy are still tops in their class...This place made history by serving the same meal seven days a week, year after year; assorted appetizers and long bread sticks, soup in tureen, spaghetti, choice of broiled chicken or filet mignon, green salad, dessert, coffee. Now there are choices at various prices, all in excess of the 85 cents I paid at my Guffanti initiation, I'm not saying how many years ago." [lostinnewyorkcity.blogspot.com/2010/01/guffantis-restaurant-only-one-meal-but.html]

