

CHAPTER 1

They Saw Me for Who I Could Be

In an odd corner of Louisville, Kentucky, there's a restaurant you'd never find unless you were looking hard for it. The unlikely location hints that this building couldn't have been anyone's first choice for a food-service business. It wasn't. In fact, it could be seen as a monument to second choices—and second chances.

The owners, Sal and Cindy Rubino, made a practice of hiring refugees fleeing conflicts in other countries and people in treatment programs for drug and alcohol addiction. And it paid off.

It paid not because Sal and Cindy set out to do good deeds for people in need, but because they set out to work with people who shared their high standards both for business and for how they lived their personal lives. It paid because Sal and Cindy saw the stories behind the job applicants—instead of seeing a prison record, or someone who didn't speak English, they saw people who had overcome harder tasks than even the daily, competitive grind of a restaurant business. And it paid because Sal and Cindy saw themselves in people who needed a second chance.

Sal and Cindy got so many second chances that it's hard to pinpoint when they finally got on their feet for good. But 2015 offers a place to start a story about a family business that found a way to succeed by living out the same life principles both at work and at home.

By 2015 Sal and Cindy's restaurant had been open in its location for eight years. It had just been featured on the Food Network cable TV show *Southern Fried Road Trip*. Its business practices were about to be recognized by the Louisville

Convention and Visitors Bureau with a special Unity Award. It was finally a thriving business.

— — —

Trouble finding Sal and Cindy's restaurant in 2015 starts with the name, an achingly generic "The Café." Next comes a forbidding turn off Broadway, one of Louisville's busier streets. It's an easy right turn just two miles from downtown, but it takes you under an old stone railroad bridge into a patchwork of large brick buildings, some in use, some not. One longtime business in the area, the Louisville Stoneware pottery company, might have a tour bus parked out front, or there might just be a couple cars in its tiny parking lot.

Although moving along the curving, curbless streets gives you the feeling of being in a ghost town, if it's lunchtime it's tough to find a parking place. The reason is your destination: a large, blocky building, windowless except for one glass wall looking onto a patio which sits almost directly beneath the trestle that carries several long and noisy freight trains a day.

Outside The Café, knots of people wait for the next table. Inside are more than 100 lunchers—more than 200 on a nice day when the patio's open. About 500 meals will be served until midafternoon, when the crowd thins and many of the tables turn to holding rows of to-go boxes, while the staff preps as many as 500 catering orders for business lunches the next day.

Stepping inside, you first notice the sound—a steady social buzz coming from mostly tables of friends. Business meals at The Café tend to happen over breakfast, when there's less competition from chatter. Under the conversations you hear the background music by XM Radio's "40s Junction" station—Glenn Miller, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole. The dining room is large and open, and every kind of antique lamp fixture you can imagine hangs from a black ceiling, lighting the room a warm yellow. The tablecloths are white and covered with glass tops. Under the glass are paper leaves, an art class project from a local elementary school. Gigantic, brightly colored posters of Broadway musicals line the wall opposite the window.

The next thing you see offers a first clue to why the place is so popular. A small round table just inside the door holds three huge cakes: foot-tall cylinders, one easily identifiable by the strawberries sitting on top; next to it a German chocolate cake with a coconut-stuffed frosting; then a black-and-white Tuxedo cake shimmering with a chocolate icing. Each has several chunks carved out of it, a sign that it's smart to order your favorite first, before it's gone—something the regulars have already done.

To the right of the cake table you spot a lectern. In 2015, the host behind the stand is Sal Rubino himself—he hasn't yet found a greeter he's confident can meet his standards for managing the logistics and hospitality of blending customers, tables, and servers. From behind the worn, wooden piece of furniture, Sal looks up, a bald man wearing black-framed reading glasses and a long-sleeved, blue button-down shirt, unremarkable, really, until he looks up at you and his eyes and smile seem to grow and pop out of his face, inviting you in and instantly persuading you that you're in a place you want to be.

“Hey, how are you doing? It's a beautiful day out there. How many do you have today?”

It's a deliberately random line of small talk, carefully thought through like everything else at The Café. “I don't say anything like, ‘Is this your first time dining with us?’” says Sal. “Because I might not remember them and they might say, ‘Oh, we're regular customers.’”

Sal will likely visit you at your table during your meal. His sunniness is something people cite when you ask why they come to The Café. Some will praise it for hiring refugees and people in recovery, but most don't even know about that—The Café neither hides it nor promotes it. Most mention the cakes as a reason to patronize the restaurant. Many will mention the friendly service, others the large portions—you see a lot of people leaving with containers of leftovers in their hands. But mostly they come for the food.

When you sit down and open the beige three-fold menu, you see four columns listing just about anything you'd want for a meal: a page of soups and salads; a range of sandwiches, all the way across to the children's section, where you find peanut butter and jelly. Flipping the menu over, you see you can have breakfast

anytime: traditional eggs, biscuits and gravy, or tributes to Southern traditions like country ham or the Southern Grits Scramble. There are innovative twists like baked oatmeal and a sweet potato cinnamon roll.

Sal does the hiring, runs the dining room, and keeps the books. But the menu is Cindy's creation, crafted over a lifetime of thinking about how to make food that people will like. In the kitchen she works with mostly refugees, from Cuba, from Burma, from Uzbekistan. Each moves around their own workstation, somehow not bumping into each other among the counters, oven, and stove. Cindy's style of greeting a visitor is to ask first about them, how they are, where they just came from. If Sal seems open and welcoming, Cindy comes across as more low-key and personal. Her glasses perch on top of her blonde hair, eyes looking inside you. Those eyes widen and her face animates when you ask about food. She describes The Caf'és fare as comfort food she strives to make "craveable" by layering flavors. She demonstrates making an omelet with her red onion relish—a blend of Italian red onions, brown sugar, red pepper flakes and soy sauce. She calls it "liquid gold" and a "flavor bomb."

Back at your table you decide on the Country Chicken Salad you've heard people rave about. It doesn't come with fireworks or folderol—two scoops of a traditional-looking mayonnaise-based mixture on a bed of leaf lettuce, red apple slices on one side, a small stem of red grapes on the other, and sprinkled with walnuts. Then you taste the flavor layers Cindy talks about—cider vinegar, white pepper, sugar. As you poke into the salad you see the real star of the plate, a mixture dense with tiny cubes of diced white meat, seasoned with parsley, basil, and thyme.

Sal also gives that chicken a starring role when he describes The Caf'és success. He'll tell you The Café offers "the total package" of good food, low prices, friendly service, and a comfortable atmosphere, each one of those with high standards. But first it's the food.

"We work hard at high quality," he says. "We don't do anything prepackaged. Everything is made from scratch. In our chicken salad we don't use precooked chicken meat like a lot of places. We buy the highest quality, fresh whole chicken breast and roast it in our kitchen."

Sal extends those standards to the quality of the employees.

“We’re very selective in who we hire. We work hard at training our staff to provide excellent service, but people have to have a certain natural hospitality. They’ve got to be able to make eye contact, have a nice smile.”

As you finish your chicken salad you might start noticing The Caf’és differences from other restaurants. It doesn’t serve alcohol. It’s not open for dinner. It’s not open for Sunday brunch. What you probably don’t know is that those features resulted from wrenching decisions by Sal and Cindy to keep their family together and to hang on to valued employees. While they sacrificed traditional restaurant profit centers to forge a better work-life balance, they hung on to their five-star standards.

“Don’t come in here to apply for a job thinking, ‘It’s just lunch; how difficult can it be to make chicken salad?’” says Sal. “This is the best chicken salad you’re ever going to eat, and the experience we create for our guests is just as high. A lot of time and effort went into making The Café what it is. It didn’t just happen.”
