

NEWS

San Pedro's Canetti's calls it quits

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Back in the day, the tall tales flew as thick as the smoke in the air at Canetti's.

Wedged between port warehouses and San Pedro's colorful fishing slips, the cafe was the place to hang for generations of fishermen and other waterfront old-timers.

But since closing its doors for good this month, the old haunt has grown silent.

The scuffed wooden chairs are stacked upside down, ready to be hauled away. Dishes are piled on what was once reverently known as "Table One," a place of honor where the most faithful regulars held court over coffee and eggs every day at Canetti's Seafood Grotto.

"I'm 80 years old, baby," owner Joe Canetti says of his retirement, his voice booming across the empty diner as sons Joe Jr. and John help tie up loose ends.

The younger generation of Canetti's has found callings in other careers, and costly equipment upgrades are always right around the corner in the fast-paced restaurant business.

And so, it was time.

The Jan. 10 closing of Canetti's comes on the heels of the announcement that another San Pedro family-owned restaurant, Papadakis Taverna, is calling it quits at the end of the month.

With its blue-and-white checkered tabletops, Canetti's is legendary among longtime residents who remember the San Pedro of years past.

The diner, opened by Canetti's parents decades ago, fast became a gathering spot for the town's many fishermen.

But its appeal spread from there, attracting businessmen, attorneys and longshoremen.

"You saw everything from the best lawyers, the best firemen, and the best politicians in San Pedro," said Tank Nelson, a former regular at Table One. "They were all in and out. They all had their own group.

"When the place was really cooking, the fishermen had their table and they'd be arguing about something, then the lawyers would be at another table quietly talking. Then there was the business table," Nelson said.

Table One was tucked up in the front corner.

"Our table was eclectic," said Nelson, who now lives in Morro Bay. "There was me, the longshoreman, and we had firemen, actors.

"It was a table for four, but we'd often have 10 or 12 people around it," Nelson said. "They'd like to tell stories. We'd talk about movies, history, Pedro.

"It was like 'Cheers.' Everyone knew your name."

The business began as a grocery store with Joe Canetti's dad, an immigrant from Italy.

A food counter grew into Canetti's Seafood Grotto, which in the 1950s took up its long-term residence on the ground floor of the port's



"In the Army, I learned if you don't eat it today, you'll eat it tomorrow," he said.

"(Television personality) Huell Howser came down here and gave me a shot on TV about 10 years ago," Canetti said. "After that I couldn't make my clam chowder fast enough."

He's proudest of his twist doughnuts, fish soup and Friday night outdoor fish barbecues.

"I made the best twist doughnuts," Canetti said. "And a lot of cioppino."

With his unmistakable deep voice – he is a "big guy with a big voice," Nelson said – Canetti regularly mingled with his customers, swapping yarns over coffee and, in the early days before it became unfashionable (and then illegal), through a thick haze of cigarette smoke.

"It was just so homey and down to Earth," said Ray Patricio of San Pedro, a retired longshoreman who has been going to Canetti's since 1948. "The prices were right and the food was good."

For Patricio's money, Canetti's fish and chips and fish combo plates were the best of the house specials.

Canetti was tapped regularly by Elin Vanderlip to cater barbecues for the upper classes at her Palos Verdes Peninsula estate.

The wealthy art collector, who died last year at the age of 90, also was a Canetti's customer from time to time.

"She liked her french fries rare," he recalled.

But it was the fellowship that drove much of Canetti's lore and success.

"People like to yak. I let them," Canetti told the Daily Breeze in a 2006 interview.

Retirement comes with no 401(k) or pension. The port owns the property. Over the course of the cafe's history, Canetti figures he gave the Port of Los Angeles more than \$800,000 in rent and property taxes for the building.

His seven children all did stints in the restaurant, as have a couple of his grandchildren more recently.

Several longtime employees put their children through college on their wages earned at Canetti's.

Times have changed, of course, and Canetti's – a popular spot for movie shoots through the years – is becoming surrounded by a changing landscape.

In the 1940s and 1950s, San Pedro had 120 fishing boats moored next to the restaurant.

Now, only 10 boats remain.

The cotton warehouses and Navy supply depot that were once adjacent to the restaurant are long gone. So are the once-famed annual Fishermen's Fiestas.

Tasteful marinas and waterfront recreation – a landscaped park opened just across the street from Canetti's on the weekend the diner closed – appear to be the area's future.

All in all, it's been a very good run, Canetti said, noting that the cafe never was robbed.

"I came to work here at 6 o'clock every day, and I'd work until 3 o'clock or sometimes 5 o'clock, seven days a week. I loved it," said Canetti, who turns 80 on Jan. 30 and plans to find work somewhere part time.

The restaurant's old sign will go on display at the Los Angeles Maritime Museum in San Pedro, as will Table One – "where more B.S. was hashed out" than anywhere else in town, Canetti said.

After an interview with a reporter, Canetti closes the empty diner's door and spots a van slowly cruising by in the parking lot. It's just before noon and the driver waves with a questioning look.

"Hello there, how are you doing?" Canetti calls out with a big smile. "Yeah, we're out of business."

As he climbs into his car to go meet some buddies for lunch, though, Canetti acknowledges that saying goodbye has been tough.

"How can you be closed after (almost) 70 years?" he said before driving away.

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