



The *Saturday* Banner

YOUR COMMUNITY NEWSPAPER

January 7, 2006

Volume 46, Number 100

INSIDE...



www.bonifanews.com

Mel's slated for makeover

Popular diner getting new look

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Popular local restaurant Mel's Diner is making some changes — and some local customers are worried about those changes.

"If it ain't broke," said one breakfast customer, "don't fix it."

The management of Mel's is eager to dispel those worries.

"This (restaurant) is our pride, and our challenge every day is to improve it," said co-owner Romey Terezi. Terezi, who started out working as a bus boy in his partner Chris Karakosta's restaurant years ago, assures customers that the quality and value is going to be improved, and that they

won't lose the qualities that customers love.

The changes are going to be about improvement, not taking away, said Karakosta. As well as additions and changes to the menu, the décor will shift to a warmer feel, with wood grains and warmer, homier colors to soften the cool tones and atmosphere of the restaurant.

"We are excited about what is happening," Terezi said, "we are making this a gourmet diner to be proud of."

Pride is a central motivating factor for the Mel's management team. Owner and founder Karakosta acknowledges that Mel's is a business, but says that it's more about a sense of pride than a bank balance.

"We live in these neighbor-

hoods," Karakosta said. "We want to be able to hold our head up high and be proud of what we have, and I think we are accomplishing that."

Karakosta and the management team at Mel's knows that in order to stay competitive, especially in the rush of growth in Southwest Florida, they need to grow and change to keep up with trends — and with their competition.

"We are really confident about what we do," said Karakosta, "and I think we have a team put together that if you put us up against anyone — we're going to do well."

If you watch the food network today, Karakosta said, the way people eat, and the methods of cooking available, have changed over the years both in home kitchens and in what people expect when they go out.

"It is an evolution process," he said. "You have to always be improving the meal. If we stand still, even if it is easier and more cost-effective, we lose."

Chief Operating Officer Ralph Desiano agrees that the restaurant has to constantly strive harder to keep up with the influx of competition in the area.

"You always have to look at competition, that's what keeps us sharp and why we are doing some of the things we are doing now," he said. "We have to keep the concept fresh and be even better so when people go to the new malls and all the new restaurants, they look at what's there and still fall back to us."

With a customer-served volume above the country average — serving more than 400,000 customers per year in the Bonita Springs facility alone — and expansion plans that include a new Cape Coral site to open in July and another site in Naples planned, Terezi credits their unique "niche" for a good part of their success.

"We are a hybrid restaurant," he said. "We stand between a family restaurants and specialty restaurants."

Offering the quality of food expected in specialty restaurants such as TGI Friday's, but maintaining the pricing to be competitive with family restaurant chains such as Perkins, allows Mel's to pull in a wider variety of customers.

In addition, as a diner, Mel's does not specialize, offering instead a widely varied menu



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The bright neon lights and crisp turquoise and silver color scheme of the Mel's restaurants are similar to a 1960's soda shop. Customers enjoy the family-friendly atmosphere of Mel's as well as the food.

MEL'S

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to appeal to everyone, said Karakosta.

"The restaurant business has become a specialty business," he said, "but as a diner, we have made a commitment to serve anything from a grilled cheese sandwich to a steak."

Other restaurants are specializing in specific areas of Mel's menu, and in order to compete against that Karakosta believes Mel's has to be as close to a specialist as possible in each and every item.

"Our goal is for people to say 'my mother and my kids and I love Mel's,'" said Terezi. "We want to make it that inclusive."

Karakosta said once people see that the change is

not going to be extensive or disruptive, they will appreciate the higher quality food.

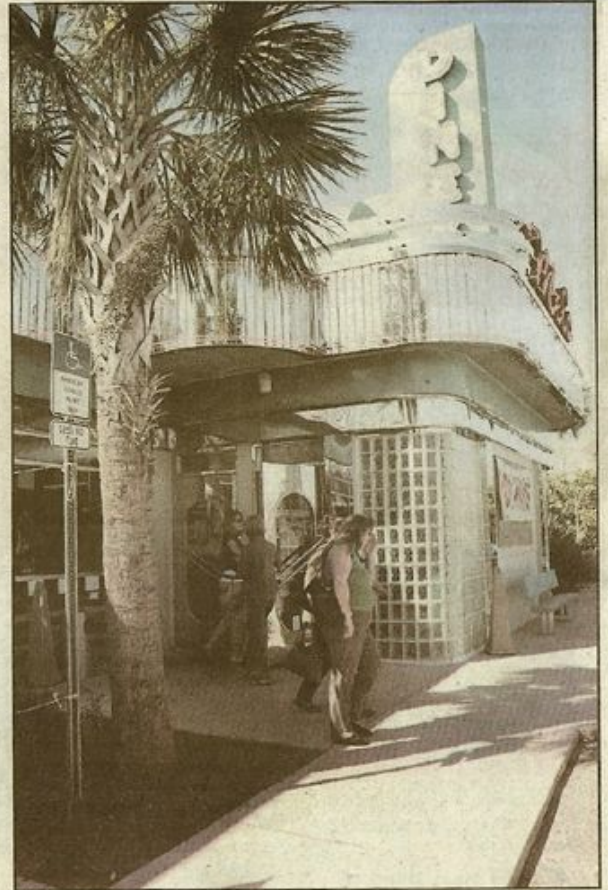
Although there will be slight changes in the appearance and image of Mel's, Karakosta said it will just be bringing the image in line with what they have always offered.

"We are going away from '60's carhop look," he said, "The rock-and-roll/cheeseburger/milkshake place is something we've really never been."

But Mel's central commitment over the next few months is to take the food quality up a level without changing the check average, said Karakosta.

"At the end of the day, it's all about the food for us," Karakosta assured. "The service and the atmosphere are important, but we want to make a commitment to the best food."

For more information on Mel's, go to <http://www.melsdiners.com>.



Mel's Diner in San Carlos Park is a popular hometown eatery, drawing in both local residents and tourists to enjoy its brightly decorated façade and friendly, laid-back atmosphere. Photos by Jessica Waters

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