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Steve Tyink

Fox Cities' Tyink tries to make area stand out

Steve Tyink, vice-president of Saturn operations and leadership development for Bergstrom Automotive, believes in the "philosophy" of the incredible experience," he said. In other words, a business or community has to make itself stand out to attract the customers, or residents, it wants. On his job, and as a volunteer, Tyink does his best to make the Fox Cities stand out.

— Story on PAGE 3

It all started in Sicily

Couple brings slice of family history to Neenah

By Kristin Stankewicz

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With the opening of Cannova's Pizzeria and Fine Italian Cuisine in downtown Neenah, life has come full circle for owners Debbie and Kyle Rasmus.

"I grew up with this. It was part of our life," said Debbie, sitting in the vintage building at 113 W. Wisconsin Ave. with their 2-1/2-year-old son, Frankie.

Debbie, whose maiden name is Cannova, comes from a family of restaurateurs. Her grandfather moved to the United States from Sicily and started the first Cannova's in Freeport, Ill., in 1921.

"It was initially a grocery store with a tavern in back that did pizzas," she said.

When her father took over in 1963, he moved Cannova's to a larger location. Debbie and her three siblings grew up in the apartment upstairs.



Debbie and Kyle Rasmus and their son, Frankie, are shown in Cannova's Pizzeria and Fine Italian Cuisine restaurant in Neenah, which they opened in December. The original Cannova's was opened in 1921 in Illinois by Debbie's grandfather. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

See Cannova's, PAGE 38

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Cannova's/Family expands business into Fox Valley area

From Page 1

That location, and a similar one in Galena, Ill., are now run by Debbie's sister and brother-in-law, who are the Rasmuses partners in the Neenah location.

"They were looking to add a third restaurant, maybe in Lake Geneva. We had been up here for 10 years, and thought it was something that would do well in this area," said Debbie.

Debbie and Kyle credit the success of the first two Cannova's restaurants with allowing them to skip some steps of the traditional business launch process.

"We didn't have a big business plan," said Kyle, who worked for the Illinois Cannova's for 10 years. "The other restaurants were our business plan."

The couple didn't do a traditional competitive analysis, either, relying on personal experience instead.

"There wasn't a place like ours around here," Debbie said. "We wanted someplace people can feel comfortable coming with children, yet it's a nice atmosphere. Or they can come in as a couple, and still feel like they're going out."

The couple's enthusiasm and prior experience helped them secure a loan. "We went in and sold them on the fact that it has been successful

the other Cannova's restaurants for 15 years.

"He was going to take a job in Chicago and it didn't work out, so he came up here," Debbie said. "We're extremely lucky to have him."

Luck also played into the Neenah Cannova's location.

"We had been looking for a building for three or four months," Debbie said. "Kyle said, 'The Sweet Pea building would be perfect.'"

The only problem? It wasn't for sale.

"The next day, I was driving downtown and saw a 'going out of business sale' sign in the window," Debbie said. "I ran in."

Days later, they signed a deal with the landlord and began remodeling plans. An architect helped them figure out the feasibility of major renovations, such as adding the kitchen, said Kyle.

They spent three months creating the "comfortable, warm atmosphere" they were after, Debbie said.

Remodeling projects included redoing the hardwood floors, drywall and plaster, painting, moving the basement stairs, and gutting the restrooms.

"Kyle did most of it," said Debbie.

A large antique bar along the east wall was a chance find by Debbie's sister. "We had looked and looked, and couldn't find anything. She found it in Illinois. It was sort of a fluke," she said.

Other décor in the restaurant was chosen to

be comfortable, yet aesthetically pleasing. "We have white tablecloths, but the brown paper over it keeps it more casual," said Debbie.

A baby grand piano in the front window is home to a pianist most Friday and Saturday nights. When the weather warms up, an outdoor back patio will seat about 30.

The Rasmuses are happy with the restaurant's atmosphere. "I told my sister, 'It feels like home,'" Debbie said.

Cannova's opens at 5 p.m. Tuesday through Sunday, for dine-in and carry-out.

"Our menu is very reasonably priced. We want people to be able come in a couple times a week and afford it," Debbie said.

Future plans include offering lunch and delivery service.

Since their Dec. 14 opening, the couple have been logging long hours. "I come in at 9 a.m., and I was here until 2:00 a.m. the other day," said Kyle.

"But that's not typical," Debbie said.

So far, said Kyle, things are going "better than expected."

They've already seen couples bring their children in early, then come back later for dinner and drinks with friends, he said.

Looking at Frankie, Debbie reflected on the connection between her past and her present. "It was a wonderful way to grow up. I feel like we're going back to our roots."