

WATSONVILLE

1990-2000

The Del Monte turns 88



Tarmo Hannula

Owners of the Del Monte Cafe and Bar, 300 Walker St., Vince (right) and Lucy Kovacich and their son Peter.

Owners boast of the best steaks in town

By MICHAEL MERRILL

STAFF WRITER

AFTER 88 YEARS, one Watsonville restaurant in the heart of the city's industrial base is still doing what it has always done — serving some of the finest steaks, chops and seafood in town.

Manager Peter Kovacich said the reputation enjoyed by the Del Monte Cafe, on the corner of Walker Road and West Beach Street, is not based on trendy, exotic recipes and it certainly is not based on high-brow atmosphere. The Del Monte has outlasted its competition for nearly a century because people like the food.

Today marks his family's 30th anniversary of ownership.

Three years ago, the cafe ceased serving dinners and switched to breakfast and lunch only because the 16 hour days were just too much to handle, says Kovacich. Last year, after much prodding from long-time customers, Kovacich

compromised and started opening for dinner on Friday nights only. He said the most popular item on the dinner menu is the 20-ounce T-bone steak. "We get our beef from the only certified Black Angus distributor in Northern California," Kovacich said. "We then dry-age it in our own meat locker and cut the steaks ourselves. Most places get their stuff pre-cut, pre-packaged and wrapped in plastic."

The steaks are then cooked on the same broiler that has been in the restaurant since 1928. Nicknamed "Dorothy," the broiler has never been replaced because it still does exactly what it was designed to do and it does that very well. "It may be old but it pumps out the best steaks anywhere," Kovacich said.

Another specialty is fresh seafood, which Kovacich has flown in from the Pike Place Market in Seattle. "We have a reputation to live up to," Kovacich said.

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"We also have an open kitchen so everyone can see exactly what we are doing at all times — and we don't want to embarrass ourselves."

Kovacich has spent his entire adult life working in the Del Monte — since he was 14 years old. His parents, Vince and Lucy Kovacich, immigrated to the U.S. in 1960 from Croatia and bought the restaurant from proprietor John Ucovich in 1968, who had owned it since 1941.

During the 30 years Kovacich has spent behind the counter, he has seen the city change. "The buildings haven't changed much, it was always run down," Kovacich said, "but the people have changed. (The Del Mon-

te) used to be a meeting place for regulars. Now we get a lot of strangers."

He said as far as he is concerned, the biggest change was not when the packing plants moved out, it was when the younger generation — the city's greatest resource — left. "We lost our youth because there was nothing to sustain them," Kovacich said. "The best and the brightest moved away because there was no future for them here. For this town to survive, we need our young people to stay and help build bridges between the generations."

Although he ran for the city council three times when he was in his early 20s, Kovacich said he could not muster the support of the people in power at the time. Because of his youth he was not taken seriously, he said. "Tony Franich told me right be-

fore he died two years ago that one of his regrets was not backing me when I ran for office 20 years ago," Kovacich said. "He told me he had come to realize that we need an influx of youth in order to survive."

Having moved here from Europe at the age of seven, Kovacich said he has paid close attention to the changing demographics of the city over the last 25 years and has a lot of compassion for people trying to survive in what can be a strange new culture. "I know what it means to be an immigrant and I know what it feels like to go to school without bilingual education," Kovacich said. "We have a lot of problems in Watsonville right now but they are problems we can overcome if we work together," he said. "We need to find a way to peacefully coexist."