

Elegy to Gabriel's Cafe

I spent nearly every Saturday of my teenage years with a grouchy man in a tiny kitchen.

Most Friday nights, too, from the time I started high school until I left for university at 18. After that, any time I came home for a visit, my first stop was my parent's house. The second was Gabrel's Cafe.

Gabriel Schacher gave me my first job, a job that, until now, I never really felt I had left. I could be away for a year and walk into his kitchen unannounced, shouting, "Hi, old man!?" and after a hug and a "how are you?", end up doing dishes or making Gabe a cup of coffee the way he likes it - mostly just a cup of ten percent cream.

Working for Gabriel made you part of his family and I think people could sense that when they walked in. The place was intimate, not only in size, but in the family photos that hung on the walls. Photos of his kids and his wedding day and his beloved wife Marie Claire after whom his best salad was named.

This may sound like a eulogy, and in a way it is. I'm grieving the loss not only of this space, these few hundred square feet on the longest street in the world, but of what Gabriel's Cafe has meant for Aurora. The Farmer's Market, which has grown to a staggering community gathering place, started with a handful of vendors in the back parking lot.

On Monday evening, Gabriel would host the weekly meeting for the Rotary Club. I would serve dinner and sit through the speakers, and watching the ways these regular citizens came out to serve their community made me want to do the same.

On Saturdays, there were the regular customers like the late Gwen and Jack McKenna, who were well into their eighties by the time I met them. Gwen wore the most beautiful broaches and Jack had the kindest smile. It's been nearly five years since both of them passed away, and many more since I last saw them, but I still remember that they drank their coffee black.

Gwen loved Gabriel's quiche. That's not a surprise - everyone loves Gabriel's quiche. My cat loved Gabriel's quiche. He knew to take that as a compliment. One of the most endearing things about Gabriel is that he would swear and yell and throw frying pans across the room if an omelette burned just a little, but show him a dog and he's like a kid with a new toy.

About the yelling: it's all part of the show! That was sometimes hard for people to understand, what with the open kitchen and all. I would bring food to a table and they'd ask, "is everything okay?" and I couldn't understand the looks of grave concern on their faces until I remembered that most restaurants don't have a cursing man in an apron in full view of the customers. To anyone who was ever concerned for the safety of the staff or glassware - don't worry, he's harmless. Everything is fine!

Gabriel's Cafe has hosted countless holiday, wedding, anniversary and birthday parties - even my own 18th birthday because it would have been a proper celebration without him there. On winter nights the glass would fog with warmth and laughter and heat from the kitchen and it felt like home you were happy to be invited to.

I have no doubt that Gabriel has played an incredible role in making me into the person I am today and I think the same can be said for this town as well. Gabriel's Cafe represents Aurora at its best - unpretentious, openhearted and steeped in history.

He is, after all, a very, very old man.

Ginny Monaco
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