
Michigan Potboiler: Hey, Who Moved My Mac ‘n’ Cheese? — Recipe Disappeared, Roiling A Small-Town Eatery; ‘We Were at Def Con 5’

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Clarkston, Mich. —The recipe book sat on a kitchen shelf between a jar of sage and a tray of butcher knives. The chefs at the Union Bar & Kitchen in this quiet village rarely touched it, because they knew most of the recipes by heart.

Then last fall, the white three-ring binder disappeared. Union owner Curt Catallo suspected larceny. He didn't care that somebody might have the recipes for potato biscuits or portabello gratin. What finally sent him storming down Main Street to hurl profane accusations at an old friend was the creeping fear that someone disloyal to the Union might have the formula for the dish that made his restaurant a success:

Macaroni and cheese.

“A classic case of small-town industrial espionage,” says Mr. Catallo, a slim 36-year-old toting a wad of keys and a flip-phone on his belt. “In a little town like Clarkston, the mac ‘n’ cheese is the name of the game.”

During the day, he writes car and truck commercials for an ad agency in Detroit. Then he goes home to Clarkston, a town of about 1,000 people that nestles by a mill pond

40 miles north of the city. Main Street runs south from Interstate 75 past a deli, a bank, a bakery and an auto-repair shop to the clapboard steeple towering over the Union.

Mr. Catallo opened the 100-seat restaurant seven years ago in a renovated church built in the 1840s. Carved oak pews turned into oversized booths. A kitchen replaced the altar. Two Blodgett convection ovens supplanted the baptismal font.

Mac ‘n’ cheese quickly became the place's religion. The Union's recipe mixed sturdy penne, creamy bechamel sauce and a melange of cheeses with a golden bread-crumbs-and-parmesan crust that goes whump when struck with a fork.

The Union serves 35 tap beers along with soups, sandwiches and fancy treatments of what Mr. Catallo calls “broad-shouldered American comfort food with a Mediterranean twist.” Mac ‘n’ cheese—\$9.75 for a full order, \$5 for a half, with or without ham—is easily the most popular. Last year, the restaurant sold 18,308 orders, not counting catering.

Mr. Catallo liked mac ‘n’ cheese as a boy, but preferred Kraft in a box to his mother's homemade. Now he won't discuss the Union's recipe in any detail, except to say, “The big secret is just a hint of opium—that's what keeps ‘em coming back.”

The real recipe, which includes Michigan pinconning cheese but no illegal substances, remained a Union secret until last fall, when Mr. Catallo hired a young cook in a dark goatee named Javier Pinedo.

Mr. Pinedo knew his way around a kitchen. He soon was quarterbacking the three-man team of line cooks who keep orders flowing. He also asked plenty of questions, Mr. Catallo says, especially about the mac ‘n’ cheese.

Mr. Pinedo started showing up for work early and parking himself near the butcher block where prep cook Franco Reyes, 43, readies the mac ‘n’ cheese. While mariachi music blared from a boombox, Mr. Reyes sprinkled Canadian cheddar on the pasta and Mr. Pinedo inquired in Spanish about what he was doing and how he made the bechamel sauce, Mr. Reyes says.

Mr. Pinedo finally asked for the sauce recipe, saying he wanted to make it for his wife, Mr. Reyes says. As Mr. Reyes recalls it, he said, "I'll make you a little to take home," but Mr. Pinedo said no, he preferred to have the recipe so he could fix it himself. Mr. Reyes refused. Later, he mentioned Mr. Pinedo's curiosity to Mr. Catallo.

One day, another cook needed the recipe book. It wasn't in its usual spot. Nobody seemed to know where it went. And no one thought to ask Mr. Pinedo, Mr. Catallo says.

But Mr. Catallo began to suspect Mr. Pinedo after hearing from Mr. Reyes, who had heard it from his sister, that the cook was moonlighting for the Market Basket, a deli in nearby Franklin, Mich., known for its homemade macaroni. The Market Basket is owned by the same two cousins who own Rudy's Quality Market a block from the Union in downtown Clarkston.

Rudy's squats in a cut-rock building beneath a pink neon sign that says "Rudy's." Inside, aromas of pizza crust and mozzarella float over bins of fresh fruit, walls heavy with wine, and glass cases filled with cold cuts, sausages and prepared meals. The market doesn't compete directly with the Union, but offers some dishes in common, including a version of macaroni and cheese.

One Saturday in November, Mr. Reyes told Mr. Catallo he had heard that the Rudy's owners had lent Mr. Pinedo money for a personal matter. "That set off alarms," Mr. Catallo says. "I thought, 'Why didn't he come to us?'"

There was more: The deli owners supposedly had ordered some of the Union's key mac 'n' cheese ingredients from the Union's supplier, R. Hirt Jr. Co. of Detroit.

After hearing that, Mr. Catallo says, "that minute, we were at Def Con 5."

Still wearing his apron, he bolted the Union and stomped down to Rudy's. He and co-owner Robert Eshshaki went into a back room and Mr. Catallo started shouting: "We have a mole in our house who stole our recipes and I think he stole them for you." He used some nasty language.

"Calm down," said Mr. Eshshaki, 34. "I've known you for 10 years."

They got Mr. Eshshaki's cousin, Chris Thomas, on speakerphone. "You could almost smell the crust of the macaroni" over the phone, Mr. Catallo says.

Mr. Thomas said that he had asked Mr. Pinedo if he knew how to make the mac 'n' cheese, and that Mr. Pinedo had said he did. He said Mr. Pinedo wasn't offered any money. He also said that Rudy's had indeed ordered cheese from the Union's supplier so they could try making the Union's mac 'n' cheese. But he said no one at Rudy's or the Market Basket ever actually made the Union specialty, and Messrs. Eshshaki and Thomas promised that no one ever would.

The next day, Mr. Catallo had his general manager, Erich Lines, fire Mr. Pinedo. Mr. Lines says he accused Mr. Pinedo of stealing the mac 'n' cheese recipe, and Mr. Pinedo said he wasn't a thief, but he didn't specifi-

cally deny taking the recipe. Mr. Pinedo didn't respond to phone calls and a letter seeking comment.

Mr. Eshshaki says he and his cousin meant no harm to the Union. "Hey, it's just macaroni and cheese," he says. "Obviously, we didn't know it was so important to Curt."

Mr. Catallo admits he may have overreacted. "Truthfully, if it hadn't been the 'Sopranos' season, I wouldn't have gone in so heavy. But it was our mac 'n' cheese. I would not have done it if it was the salsa." ❖

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