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Marino's Italian Restaurant a 30-year family affair

Karen Robes Meeks, Staff Writer Posted: 08/22/2011 06:52:40 PM PDT Updated: 08/22/2011 07:04:54 PM PDT

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The Marino family is set to celebrate the 30th anniversary of Marino's Italian Restaurant in Bellflower. The restaurant serves traditional Sicilian recipes from the owner's great-great-grandparents. front: Kate, Meg and Mary. back Tom Sr., Toni, Tom Jr. and Andrea Marino. (Robert Casillas / Staff Photographer)

BELFLOWER - Marino's Italian Restaurant is a family business in every sense of the word.

Owner Tom Marino's family has been infused in every aspect of the Italian restaurant business since it opened in 1981, from the lemon and chocolate ricotta cheesecakes his great aunt makes to the involvement of his 83-year-old father, a former shoe repairman who often closed shop after a full day's work to make pizzas.

The black-and-white photographs hanging throughout the restaurant's wood-paneled walls? Most feature Marino's family. The floral lace curtains framing the restaurant's windows? They were fashioned by Marino's mother, Mary, who also washed dishes and prepped the pastas in the restaurant's early years.

Family is a big part of why Marino's has a loyal following that has kept the 17126 S. Bellflower Blvd. place specializing in Southern Italian eats humming after all these years. This month, Marino's celebrates 30 years in business.

"It's the reason," said Marino, whose restaurant resembles the home of a Sicilian grandmother, with a victrola sitting in one corner of the room - not far from bottles of red wine - and marinara and garlic filling the air.

"Someone from the family is here every day," he said. "We talk to you, we see you, we open the wine, we bus the tables."

Italian food has always been a big part of the family. The Marinos hail from Sicily and the cooking tradition dates back to the 1800 s.

Marino, who grew up in

Long Beach, remembers being at his grandmothers' houses, watching them cook.

"Grandma was always in the kitchen," he said. "We ate very well."

He was 13 when he got a job as a dishwasher at Fiddler's Three and learned about the restaurant business from the company, where he worked from 1969 until he started Marino's in 1981.

He followed in the footsteps of his family, who all ran shoe repair or barber shops.

"I was ingrained in that," he said. "That's why I wanted my own business."

He secured their current location in downtown Bellflower and the family went to work gutting, scrubbing, painting and decorating.

"We did it all ourselves," Marino said. "Morning til night we worked, and opened in one week."

Both of Marino's parents, now in their 80 s, still help out at the restaurant

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Both of Marino's parents, now in their 60's, still help out at the restaurant.

"That's just the way we do it," said his mother, Mary. "We wanted him to succeed. He worked so hard. We all did."

Family is what has kept them afloat when the recession has claimed many Mom and Pop businesses.

"You take care of your customers and they come back," Marino said.

That family dynamic also extends to his staff, many of whom have been working at Marino's for 20 to 30 years. Several servers are children of parents who worked at the restaurant when they were young.

"We treat them like family," Marino said.

Not one to rest on his laurels, Marino is already working toward the next milestone.

"I've got to stay afloat," he said. "I have 20 more years to go."

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