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Totowa restaurant closes

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Saturday, December 30, 2006

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By **JENNIFER H. CUNNINGHAM**
HERALD NEWS

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TOTOWA -- Regulars accustomed to sitting down to a steaming plate of pancakes at a popular eatery were in for a shock this week.

After 41 years, the Calico Kitchen, a Route 46 pancake house that served thousands of North Jersey families, closed its doors forever Wednesday.

The eatery's owners, Ron and Marlene Iozzio of Little Falls, decided to sell after steadily losing money on the diner -- one of only a handful of mom-and-pop businesses left on the busy thruway. The spot will get a new life next year when its new owners convert it into a sushi restaurant, the Iozzios said.



"We had a lot of good times here," said Marlene, 51, who dished out waffles, silver dollar pancakes and steak and eggs at Calico for the last 28 years. "It was my life."

The Calico Kitchen was more than just a place to work for the Iozzios, they said. It was the place where the couple met, where their love blossomed and where they eventually married in 1991.

Over the years, the restaurant has seen its share of both good times and bad -- with a dose of the bizarre for good measure. There have been more brawls at the pancake palace than the Iozzios care to remember. There was the manager who stole, and the waitresses who stopped working the minute the owners left for the evening.

But they also recalled bringing in the homeless for cups of hot, steaming coffee. One time, Ron recalls coming across a man eating out of the Dumpster in the back.



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"He said he was hungry," Ron said. "I brought him in and we fed him a meal. We couldn't see anyone starving."

Once, during closing time about 25 years ago, the cook called out 'Last Call!' and a man asleep at a table began to take his clothes off and fold them as if he was getting ready for bed.

"He was home," Ron said with a smile.

Closing up the eatery Thursday, Marlene wrapped up the old Saturday Evening Post covers that adorned the wood-paneled walls, while a steady stream of customers walked up to the restaurant's door, only to find it locked.

"I've been coming here since I was a little kid," said Shannon Murphy, 26, of West Paterson. "They always had the best French toast."

The restaurant opened as Aunt Jemima's Kitchen in 1965, but new owners changed the name to Calico Kitchen four years later. Ron's brother, Larry, who started out as a dishwasher at the eatery, worked his way up and eventually bought half the business. When Larry passed away 10 years ago, Ron inherited his shares, and Marlene bought out Larry's silent partner.

But in the last five years, Calico Kitchen saw a decline in customers, after a series of franchise restaurants sprung up along Route 46, Marlene said.

"You've got Applebee's, you've got the Cheesecake Factory. Things went down," she said. "It's not the same. But we wanted to hold on because this was our life."

Customers outside Calico Kitchen Thursday said they were sad to learn of its demise.

"It's an awful shame," said Tim Masters, of Boonton. "You can't get local food anymore. The whole country's becoming a giant Red Lobster."

But Rick Jasinski, 26, of West Paterson, had a more pressing matter on his hands. "Now where are we gonna go for breakfast?" he said.

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