



STAR Q&A

Q&A: Frank Pellegrino Jr. On Bringing Rao's to LA

By Lesley Balla

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Having grown up working in his family's restaurant, the storied Rao's in East Harlem, open since 1896, Frank Pellegrino Jr. (aka "Frankie") knows a thing or two about hospitality. Whether it's for the 10-table original, said to be the hardest reservation to get anywhere in the country, or the 400-seat Las Vegas outpost at Caesars Palace, you'll find old-school Italian panache, an amazing jukebox, fantastic meatballs and one very good lemon chicken. And sure, a few mob stories here and there. Pellegrino, along with his father, Frank Sr., and cousin Ron Straci, will open the first West Coast location today in Hollywood, which he says is more reminiscent of the original than the one in Vegas. "Sometimes I think I'm in New York one minute, and a couple minutes later I think Vegas," he adds. "And then realize I'm in LA."

Pellegrino walks us through the new Rao's, which opens for dinner tonight, and tells us what's in store for LA. Even what it takes to get a reservation, which is already almost as difficult as the New York original.

Zagat: Where are you right now?
Frank Pellegrino Jr.: Sitting in the new restaurant. We're finally getting our footing. The responses we've had for our friends and family and soft opening have been spectacular.

Zagat: True to the legend, we understand you're already solidly booked for tonight.
FP: It looks like we're fully committed this whole week. The reception here in LA has been above and beyond our expectations.

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Zagat: How long have you worked for the restaurants?

FP: Thirty-one years. I started as a part time busboy when I was 13 in East Harlem. Worked my way up the ladder. I'm still the head busboy.

Zagat: So how did Rao's end up in Hollywood and why now?

FP: Believe it or not, some years back we were looking at another project in another part of the country, and we declined that project. Just joking around, myself, my father and cousin Ron said, why not do something in LA? Lo and behold a dear friend kind of heard that from my dad, and said, that's a great idea. And so we started to look around. And we looked for quite some time. And nothing really spoke to us. And then we thought maybe it wasn't in the stars, but then this wonderful little space presented itself to us.

Zagat: What do you like about the new space?

FP: The history of the location. It's where all the studios used to be, where Warner Brothers got established. It just all clicked for us. It seemed to have a lot of correlation with our place in East Harlem. It's off the beaten path, but a bit of a destination. And at the same time, it's an area that's gentrifying itself. And the history really worked hand in hand with the philosophy of our place in New York. The building is 100 years old. It was original the Hollywood Canteen, a huge part of helping out our troops during WWII as the facilitator of the USO. That history really touched us, and provided us a great sense of purpose, a reason to be here. It just came together. It found us when we were looking for it.

Zagat: Rao's Vegas replicates the original New York dining rooms to a tee. What about Hollywood?

FP: It's completely reminiscent of our New York restaurant in size, scale, look. We still have our booths, the jukebox, cherry-wood walls, white tablecloths. At times even I'm a little confused as to where I am.

Zagat: So it's small and intimate like New York?

FP: New York has about 65 seats; here we have 100 seats. And 30 of those are out on the patio in the back of the restaurant. It's a very intimate, warm setting. It plays all of the music we have in New York spanning 65-70 years of incredible artists, arrangements and musicians.

Zagat: What about the menu?

FP: It's going to be the same as New York. We offer all of the same dishes and style of dining. I like to think of it as a tasting menu. You go through appetizers, pastas, main courses and desserts. It's created so you can go through the whole thing, a full meal. In Vegas, they're running off to shows so it's a different dynamic. This really feels like

home.

Zagat: Chef Nicole Grimes, who came from your Vegas restaurant, is heading up the kitchen. Does she have plans for new dishes, something exclusive to LA?

FP: Presently the prime focus is making sure we hit the benchmark with our signature dishes and menu items that we have in New York. But as our relationships with our vendors blossom, we are certainly going to take advantage of all the ingredients California has to offer. We're already using them in our recipes. The quality of some of the ingredients are so vibrant, it's like we went out to pick them ourselves.

Zagat: For anyone who's never been to Rao's, what are the most popular menu items?

FP: Seafood salad, the roasted peppers, baked clams, fritto misto. Our pasta with Bolognese sauce is extraordinary. Our amatriciana sauce is to die for. Veal chops. The lemon chicken for certain. The meatballs. What's most interesting is to see the response from the guests here in LA. They delve into the food, and to see their appreciation for it is just wonderful.

Zagat: Reservations are already almost as tough here as in New York.

FP: Yes, our guests in New York who come on a weekly or monthly basis have been going to Rao's - and I don't want to age or date anyone - we've had standing reservations for 35 years. I know from me, when I have the opportunity to go back home and visit and work there, it's like a family reunion every time. We can only hope for that here.

Zagat: Do you already have designated tables for regulars?

FP: We have friends and some new acquaintances who've made reservations for the future. And quite honestly, it would be crazy for us to think it will be the same as New York. Call and make a reservation. We can't control who will want to come and when. It will define itself, and hopefully it will be as successful.

Zagat: Once we chatted with your father in Vegas and he told us that the best way to get a table in New York is to sit at the bar, keep going in, hope to make friends, and then maybe you'll be able to make a reservation one day. Is that what we have to do in Hollywood?

FP: People are always welcome to come in and have a drink. Our bar here is about the same size as in New York, maybe even a little bit smaller in seating. But we have some banquettes that are part of the bar area, so we can accommodate guests who want to have a drink. But there's no dining at the bar. You can reserve one of those banquettes for dining. It's a small restaurant and limited in the capacity. It enhances the experience. It's all about the guests.

Zagat: It's interesting to hear you say that. That's not always apparent at a lot of restaurants these days. Many seem to be driven by a chef's or owner's ego, not by what the customer wants.

FP: I'm always skeptical about other people's motivations, so to speak. This is about the people. Without these people, I wouldn't be able to eat. They can go anywhere they want to go, they don't have to come here. We're very grateful for their presence.

Zagat: And the restaurant is closed on Saturday and Sundays. How novel!

FP: The primary reason for it is that we want to make sure we are able to take care of our guests' needs. The other critical factor is, in our opinion, for them to establish that relationship with our servers, management and workers. And it lends to developing the camaraderie with our staff. We only have one staff. I'm not wondering about who's covering shifts. There's no quota, you know. It also helps our team. We're all in the sink. Everyone knows what's happening and what needs to happen. There's little room for miscommunication. And most importantly, everything, everyone needs a little bit of a rest.

Zagat: Any plans for more Rao's on the horizon?

FP: It took us 117 years to get to Vegas, and another seven to get to LA. My family is very cautious and wants to make sure that we are providing the right experience again and again. We're not looking to expand any further, but who knows what the future holds for us. We're always open. We have to make sure everything is in line and sustainable before we move on to another project.

Zagat: We wonder if we'll see some of your New York regulars out here.

FP: I'll tell you what. It happens in Vegas and New York, and even here a bit. You never know who's going to be in that dining room. It could be the mailman, the plumber, a head of state. And that symbiosis is just magical.

Rao's LA is located at 1006 Seward St. in Hollywood. Reservations can be made by calling 323-962-7267.

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