

LOS ANGELES

ONE YEAR IN HOLLYWOOD

Balancing Hospitality, Tradition and The Wait for Tables at Rao's in Hollywood

by Farley Elliott Oct 27 2014, 11:16a @overoverunder



Wonho Frank Lee

The NYC legend has been serving Hollywood for one year.

Welcome to *One Year In*, a profile that features restaurants that are just now celebrating their first year's anniversary. Here are their struggles, accomplishments, and future plans.

Frank Pellegrino Jr. has a hard time getting into his own restaurant, the East Harlem Italian-American legend **Rao's**. The classic ten table red sauce joint is notoriously finicky about guests securing seats, but to hear Pellegrino tell it, that's due more to decades of loyalty than any sense of exclusivity. People just love to eat at Rao's.

Following a bustling expansion in Las Vegas -- the first in the restaurant's now 120 year old history -- Rao's has come to Hollywood, settling on Seward in the old Hollywood Cantina space just below Santa Monica Blvd. The wood-lined restaurant is meticulously detailed to retain the charm of the East Harlem original, from the photos to the hospitality shown at the door. Pellegrino sat down with Eater to talk about Rao's first year in Hollywood, the trouble with exporting tradition and whether or not you need to book a reservation a year in advance.

What has been the plan for Rao's in Los Angeles? What made you want to expand out here? There is no continuity to the growth of Rao's. Everything has happened organically. And because of that I think it really demonstrates what Rao's is about, and how it became what it is. It's so much more than just a restaurant. Growing up there — I started there when I was twelve years old — it's more than a restaurant to me. It's my home. That's the hallmark of what we do. Those folks who grace us with their presence, who walk through those doors, are not guests at my restaurant. They're guests at my home.

Obviously with a name like Rao's that's been around for so long in Harlem, there's a comfort, a familiarity. Was it hard to transition that to Los Angeles? You just asked the magic question. Believe it or not, the restaurant in New York, as comfortable as it is, there is so much energy there that defies the law of physics. I think our whole entire family has been trying to decipher it for the last fifty years. It's just magic. The one thing that carries us through, and really I believe makes Rao's special, is the hospitality, and the ability to embrace guests. And that takes time. It's not something that happens overnight.

How do you balance that sense of tradition with a need to modernize? I think that today it's very difficult. I think it would be foolish to try and predict what's next. We all have ideas, and those serve as our intentions or inspirations, but it's ever-changing. Just in the last 20 years, look at the evolutions that this industry has gone through. It's like NASA has fueled it. And with that has come an incredible burst of creativity, and moving away from the basics somewhat.

In the evolution of Rao's, we were never one to follow trends. The food that we've created comes from

my grandparents, my great-grandparents, when they first came here and didn't have two nickels to rub together. So it was a lot of taking the very basics that they had from their homeland, and finding a way to re-execute them here. It has to do with the loyalty of home.

What was very fortunate for us was Mimi Sheridan, in 1977. She wrote about Rao's, which was completely unexpected. On her last visit before writing the review, said to my uncle Vincent, "I'm going to be writing a story about you for the *New York Times*." And my uncle said said: "Please, keep it small." And he really meant that.

But the essence of what we do is still in between the food and the experience. Hospitality can't be done through a screen. Hospitality is really about an interaction, a sharing. And it's through that opportunity to share something with someone else, that is really what this is all about. It's the catalyst for all of our metamorphosis and growth.



Have you found yourself changing that level of hospitality to suit Los Angeles? The reception here, I must tell you, was a challenge. How do you go from a small ten table restaurant in East Harlem, where I sit down with you and discuss the menu, to here? In New York, it's 70 dinners, maybe 65 a night. And this location in Los Angeles actually parallels that in a lot of ways, and I'm proud of that.

From New York, we go to Las Vegas. After 112 years, that was our first expansion, and the dining rooms there account for 8,000 square feet. In New York, it's 3,500 square feet, but you try and execute

the same model in a 340 seat restaurant.

Now, when I'm here [in Los Angeles], it's like I'm at a Thanksgiving, surrounded by friends and family. I want to stop eating, but I just can't. And I think to myself, wow. All of those other facets of the business just fall away, and you realize that this is worth it. This is awesome. And that's really how I feel about what we do.

The story with the New York Rao's for a long time was the impossible reservations, the pre-paid tables. Have people just assumed that same exclusivity exists out here? I don't think so. From my understanding, no, you might not need a reservation every night to dine at Rao's in Hollywood, but in the next couple of months, you may well need one.

Let me tell you the hurdle that New York is for us, and I say that lightly; the restaurant is still impossible to get into. Myself and my role in all of this, my influence is so small. But that is solely because of the loyalty that's demonstrated to the folks that made Rao's what it is today. You walk into that restaurant any night of the week, and half the room has been coming there for the past 35 years, 20 years. Wow. I owe everything to those people.

You're one year in now. Where do you see this place in five years? I can tell you what I would love to see. And I can't guarantee it. But five years from now, when I walk through those doors, I get to sit down in the dining room with family members, new friends, people singing, laughing, having their own moments. I want to see their joy, their happiness. That's what I'd like to see. That's my intention, but I can't do it alone.

RAO'S

Rao's

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