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The Camp Fire destroyed his pizzeria. COVID-19 won't stop his plans to rebuild in Sparks

Johnathan L. Wright, Reno Gazette Journal Published 6:00 a.m. PT May 25, 2020 | Updated 8:57 a.m. PT May 25, 2020

*Among the menu offerings: the *other* Chicago Pizza*

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Jim Flanagan lost his home and his restaurant, Mamma Celeste's Gastropub & Pizzeria, in the Camp Fire that destroyed Paradise, Calif., in 2018. He moved to Sparks to rebuild and reopen the restaurant. (Photo: Provided to RGJ Media)

An arc, mathematicians will tell you, is a curve connecting two points at either end. A brick arc, in sandstone the color of espresso, joins two points in the life of Jim Flanagan, his then and his now.

At one end of the arc lies the Camp Fire of November 2018, the deadliest in California history, which destroyed the town of Paradise, taking with it Flanagan's home and his restaurant, Mamma Celeste's Gastropub & Pizzeria.

At the other end of the arc lies the [new Mamma Celeste's](#) taking shape at 360 Los Altos Parkway in Sparks, where Flanagan moved after the fire early last year.

The brick arc itself once trimmed the mouth of the pizza oven at the original Mamma Celeste's. "My sister dug it out of the rubble and saved it," Flanagan said. "My plan is to bring it here and mount it."

For independent restaurants, the business can be precarious even in the best of times. But to build and open a restaurant during a pandemic, with fewer customers allowed, no bar seating and a hobbled economy — what in hell is Flanagan thinking?

“When the pandemic hit, I had an option of pulling out,” Flanagan, 46, said. “I had not signed my contract with my general contractor. I had the architectural and engineering plans produced, but I had not submitted them (for approval).”

Just like back home — with closer powder



The wood-fire oven trimmed in sandstone brick from the original Mamma Celeste's Gastropub & Pizzeria destroyed in November 2018 in California's devastating Camp Fire. (Photo: Provided to RGJ Media)

California State Route 70 makes its way north from Sacramento, passing east of Chico and Paradise, then meandering to join U.S. 395 near the Nevada border. Flanagan opened Mamma Celeste's in Chico in 2012 while living in Paradise.

“My dream was to have my business in the same town I was living in,” Flanagan said of his decision to eventually move the restaurant to Paradise. “I found a location on my third try, an old beat-up diner, 60 years old. I remodeled it for 10 months. I had it open for four months (before the fire).”

Not deep: From the wood-fire oven, the *real* Chicago pizza



When it's complete, the new Mamma Celeste's Gastropub & Pizzeria will feature a dining room, bar, wood-fire oven, garage-style roll-up door and terrace. (Photo: Provided to RGJ Media)

The new Mamma Celeste's, named for Flanagan's maternal grandmother, a great cook, was designed by MBA Architecture & Interior Design of Reno and is being built by the local office of Agate Construction. Estimated opening is sometime in late summer.

The restaurant will occupy a 2,500-square-foot space with a 55-seat dining room and a 20-seat bar at total capacity, plus a garage-style roll-up door and a terrace looking onto the Sparks hills.

A wood-fire pizza oven will take pride of place. The build-your-own section of the pizza menu features deep-dish and "cracker crust" pizzas, both specialties of Flanagan's hometown of Chicago.

In fact, some Chicagoans say deep-dish is a cheese-burdened cliché best left to tourists. They say the real Chicago pie is a round one with a crisp, crunchy, cracker-y, whippet-thin crust sliced into squares, not wedges.

Chicago locals call this pizza a bar or pub pizza, Flanagan said, something to snack on with a beer at the tavern.

Another section of the pizza menu offers classic pies like a Margherita; a host of specialty pies, including a red-sauce J's Freight Train with Mamma's meatballs and a white-sauce Club Pizza with club sandwich toppings; and vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free and dairy-free options.



Mamma Celeste's Gastropub and Pizzeria is taking shape at 360 Los Altos Parkway in Sparks, near the Sparks Crossing center. (Photo: Provided to RGJ Media)

Plus, he's positioned for the new restaurant normal.

At the old Mamma Celeste's, Flanagan always required workers to wear gloves, he said, and his hand washing stations were always touchless, from soap dispensing to knee-operated sinks to hand dryers.

There's plenty of parking at Mamma Celeste's that could be converted into seating with the proper permits, plenty of room for curbside pick-up, and pizza is the optimum takeout and delivery food.

Still . . .

"I can certainly offer curbside. I can certainly market more for takeout, but this is not a takeout pizza place," Flanagan said. "This is predicated for dine-in. I love the service aspect. If I was going to do takeout pizza, I would have bought a Pizza Guys franchise."

Which makes complete sense. You don't come through fire, then go mano a mano with a pandemic, just to send out boxes of pepperoni pizza.