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THINGS TO DO > RESTAURANTS, FOOD AND DRINK

## So long, pizza war? NY icons Juliana's & Patsy's pizzerias hit S. Florida, bringing shared history & coal-fired pies

Both are descendants of the same famed Italian ancestor: Pasquale "Patsy" Lancieri, the inventor of by-the-slice pizza.



Amy Beth Bennett / Sun Sentinel and Juliana's Pizza / Courtesy

Margherita pies from Patsy's Pizzeria, left, and from Juliana's Pizza. Both New York pizza icons with a decades-old rivalry, the restaurants have expanded outside the Big Apple for the first time with coal-fired pies in Palm Beach County. (Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun Sentinel; and Juliana's Pizza/Courtesy)

Two New York pizzerias, both alike in dignity, prospered in the Big Apple as coal-fired descendants of the same famed Italian ancestor: Pasquale "Patsy" Lancieri, the inventor of by-the-slice pizza. And their legendary "pizza war" thrilled — and astonished — diners for decades.

Now, in an act of serendipity, the successors of both spots, Patsy's Pizzeria in East Harlem and Juliana's Pizza in Brooklyn, have delivered their first out-of-state restaurants to Palm Beach County to compete — like all New York-style pizzerias do — against each other.

The 92-year-old Patsy's Pizzeria, founded by Patsy Lancieri, just fired up its first restaurant in early May in Boca Raton. The 4,300-square-foot sit-down boasts a menu of heroes, salads, pastas and casual Italian entrees along with its signature pies, fired in an 800-degree, gas-coal combo oven.



Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel

Owner Matthew Raja is shown in front of the custom-made pizza oven at the new Patsy's Pizzeria in Boca Raton on Tuesday, May 13, 2025. (Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Juliana's Pizza, cofounded in Brooklyn's Dumbo neighborhood in 2012 by late pizza icon Patsy Grimaldi — yes, another Patsy — plans to open around Labor Day as one of the first tenants of West Palm Beach's rising NORA District, in a 3,600-square-foot space. Once ranked No. 1 pizza in the country by TripAdvisor, its new outpost will fire pies in twin 800-degree coal ovens that are replicas of the original on Old Fulton Street.

Yet, despite landing in the same location at the same time, they say their longstanding pizza feud is officially ... well-done.

"Nah, we're not fighting anymore," says Matt Grogan, a recent Palm Beacher and cofounder of Juliana's Pizza. "Theirs is very good, but it's a completely different animal from what we make."

Patsy's co-owner Matthew Raja is equally diplomatic: "No, I don't think we're in a pizza rivalry. It's a good pizza they have. We're very famous as well, so we don't need to compete with anyone. Celebrities come to our locations."

So there you have it, time and geography have apparently quashed their rivalry. But that wasn't always the case. Both pizza heavyweights spent the majority of the 1990s embroiled in lengthy legal squabbles.

### **War of the Patsy's**



# SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

Patsy's Pizzeria was founded by Patsy Lancieri in 1933, and later begat other New York icons like Grimaldi's. (Fun fact: The Harlem original played a pivotal role in last summer's horror prequel "A Quiet Place: Day One.")

Lancieri's nephew, Patsy Grimaldi, shoveled coal into ovens, bussed tables and managed his uncle's shop from the 1950s until the 1970s before branching off to build a New York pizza renaissance that's still very much alive.

After leaving Patsy's in 1974 to work stints in other restaurants, Grimaldi in 1990 signed a lease for a 1,500-square-foot former hardware store in the shadow of the Brooklyn Bridge — and promptly ran into trouble for naming the restaurant after himself: Patsy's.

A legal skirmish ensued when Frank Brija, who bought the Harlem Patsy's from Lancieri's widow, Carmella, in the early '90s, began applying for trademarks and threatening to sue anyone else using the name "Patsy's."



One of the thin-crust, coal-fired pies at Juliana's Pizza, which is set to open around Labor Day in West Palm Beach's NORA District. (Juliana's Pizza/Courtesy)

Cue the pizza war. Brija went on an expansion spree and opened more Patsy's franchises around the city. Meanwhile, the Grimaldi family challenged the trademark case in court, with legal expenses topping \$150,000, Carol Grimaldi, Patsy's wife, told New York Magazine in 2012.

Eventually the fees grew too burdensome, recalls Juliana's cofounder Grogan, a former Wall Street investment banker and self-described "pizza nerd" who's been close friends with the Grimaldis since 1990.

"The Grimaldis decided to change the Brooklyn Patsy's to Grimaldi's to avoid fighting the trademark," Grogan says.

Under the new name, Grimaldi's still drew heavy traffic to Brooklyn, where hungry diners sought signature pies with white splotches of fresh mozzarella baked in minutes over a blazing heap of anthracite coal. Celebrities, alongside aficionados, even made pilgrimages to Old Fulton Street in support: Bob Costas, John Turturro, Warren Beatty, Annette Bening.

Except the legal woes didn't end there. By 1998, Patsy Grimaldi and his wife wanted to retire, so he sold Grimaldi's to Frank Ciolli, an investor and regular who intended to make Grimaldi's a national chain, and did. (Ciolli eventually grew Grimaldi's into 41 locations in 12 states, including one outpost in Palm Beach Gardens.)



Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel

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The Benny Blanco pizza with fresh mozzarella, pancetta, black truffle purée, truffle oil, and a fried egg at Patsy's Pizzeria in Boca Raton on Tuesday, May 13, 2025. (Amy Beth Bennett / South Florida Sun Sentinel)

The relationship soured months after the sale and stayed that way for years, Grogan says, until 2012, when he decided to help Grimaldi open a new pizzeria. Unable to call it "Patsy's" or "Grimaldi's," Patsy Grimaldi decided to name it after his mother: Maria "Juliana" Lancieri Grimaldi.

**'The water thing is a myth'**

# SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

Raja, a cousin of Brija who's opened new Patsy's locations across New York for two decades, says no trace of the family's former rivalry with Patsy Grimaldi's brand survives 30 years later, even on South Florida turf.

"I definitely want to try Juliana's when it opens in West Palm," Raja says.

In Boca Raton, Raja says he did his best to recreate the 16 other N.Y. locations of Patsy's, installing terrazzo floors, green granite countertops, custom European chairs and tables — even a photo of founder Patsy Lancieri.

"I respect the original family," he says. "They were part of the transition."

Loyal New York transplants, retirees and snowbirds are everywhere in Boca, a built-in audience familiar with the Patsy's brand, he adds.

The menu, however, includes some only-in-South-Florida additions, including "Mintillio" tagliatelle, a blueberry-infused pasta topped with ricotta salata, olive oil, salt and fresh basil; and fettuccine grassadonia with tomato confit, jumbo crab meat and fresh herbs. That's in addition to entrees like mushroom risotto, breaded veal Milanese and a 16-ounce prime N.Y. strip; and seven lunch-only heroes including meatball and eggplant parmigiana and the Frank Sinatra (prosciutto di parma, mozzarella, olive oil and black pepper).





The Berkshire Piccante pork chop entree is one of the non-pizza entrees at Patsy's Pizzeria in Boca Raton. (Amy Beth Bennett/South Florida Sun Sentinel)

Top-sellers at the new Patsy's, by far, are the 11 pizza styles that range from original thin-crust with fresh mozzarella orbs to Benny Blanco, a blend of mozzarella, pancetta, ricotta, black truffle puree, fried egg and truffle oil.

For the record, Raja refuses to buy the stale debate, sometimes raised by pizza fanatics, that South Florida water can't flavor the crust like New York water can.

"The water thing is a myth," says Raja, who bakes 300 pies a week. "It's about our ingredients. We have a 100-year-old recipe, we do our own sauce and cheese, and our custom oven shoots a big flame over the top that gives a great char. We're one of the first pizzerias in America, and still one of the best in the country."

'Patsy had a vision'

For his part, Grogan, cofounder of Juliana's, is keen to try Patsy's in Boca Raton.

"Honestly, the fact that we're both here is just an indication of the allure of Florida," he says. "People are looking for a change, but there's probably an expectation that the pizza will be as good as it is in New York. We're doing all we can to replicate the look, feel and taste."

# SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

Grogan picked West Palm Beach for its “Wall Street South” reputation and because NORA District, sprouting up in a rougher section of the city, reminds him of Brooklyn’s “sketchy” Dumbo neighborhood in 1990, when he visited for the first time.



In this file image, cofounder Matt Grogan, left, shares a pie with friend and pizza icon, the late Patsy Grimaldi, at Juliana's Pizza in Brooklyn. The restaurant will open its second location in West Palm Beach sometime around Labor Day, Grogan says. (Juliana's Pizza/Courtesy)

Grogan fell in love with Patsy Grimaldi's pies at first sight: “You have to understand that there were dollar slice shops everywhere that used grated, processed mozzarella and cooked in gas ovens. And here came Patsy, who put bright white circles of fresh mozz, fresh tomato, and it was splashed around the pie, not ladled. The bottom of the crust was mottled like a leopard because they used coal. I'll never forget the seasoned char.

“Patsy had a vision of a busy neighborhood and took a chance on a broken-down hardware store that sat empty for years,” he says. “He changed it for the better. NORA can do the same thing by revitalizing the area for good.”

Juliana's, specializing in smoky, slightly charred, thin-crust pies, will offer eight styles including White with mozzarella and garlic, a cheeseless Marinara with tomato, basil and garlic; the No. 1, topped with smoked scamorza, pancetta and scallions without tomato; and the No. 2 with sliced cherry tomatoes, Bufala mozzarella, garlic and sea salt. The pizzeria also offers lentil and pasta fagioli soups, salads, al dente spaghetti with meatballs, espresso and egg creams.

# SOUTH FLORIDA SunSentinel

Patsy Grimaldi never got to visit the West Palm Beach Juliana's before he died in February at age 93, although he blessed the expansion, Grogan says. Which is why Grogan decided to surprise him last year by bringing a piece of South Florida to Brooklyn — he schlepped 7 gallons of West Palm Beach tap water into Juliana's, asked the chef to make pies using water from each city, then did a blind taste-test in the dining room.



One of the specialty pies at Juliana's Pizza, which will open in West Palm Beach's NORA District. (Juliana's Pizza/Courtesy)

"We were all gathered in the Brooklyn Juliana's, and Patsy took a bite, and I took a bite, then our chef and the whole crew. And Patsy thought the West Palm pizza was made with Brooklyn water," he says.

No staff member — not even the pizza king himself — could tell the difference.

And that, Grogan says, is "all you need to know about the New York water debate."

*Patsy's Pizzeria is open at 114 Plaza Real S., Boca Raton. Visit [patsyspizzafloirida.com](http://patsyspizzafloirida.com) or call 561-334-2553.*

*Juliana's Pizza is expected to debut around Labor Day at 875 N. Railroad Ave., West Palm Beach. Go to [norawpb.com/lease/julianas-pizza](http://norawpb.com/lease/julianas-pizza).*