# Ray’s Pizza, the First of Many, Counts Down to Its Last Slice



Ray's Pizza was opened by a man named Ralph in 1959

It did not call itself the flagship Ray’s Pizza because it never really had a fleet. It was not Original Ray’s or Famous Ray’s or Original Famous Ray’s or Real Ray’s or Ray’s on Ice or any of the other cloned shops sprinkled like shredded mozzarella all over town. It was simply Ray’s Pizza, and in the great pizza wars of New York City, it was respected as having been the first, standing more or less above the fray at 27 Prince Street in Little Italy, with tree limbs holding up the basement ceiling and an owner whose name wasn’t even Ray.

And now, it seems, barring any surprises, Ray’s Pizza — the original that was so original it did not have the word “original” in its name — appears doomed to close at the end of the month.

This is not a popular topic at Ray’s right now.

“I don’t want you to put that this is the end,” said Helen Mistretta, the manager who, seven months before her 80th birthday, is in no mood for weepy nostalgia. “It’s the end of 27 Prince, not the end of Ray’s of Prince Street.”

The closing, long story short, follows a legal dispute among heirs with various interests in the building at 27 Prince, which includes apartments and the two sides of Ray’s: the pizzeria and an Italian restaurant, each with its separate entrance, but sharing a kitchen and the corporation name, Ray’s of Prince Street. When the Ray in Ray’s, one of the owners of the building, died in 2008, a row arose over whether the restaurant’s lease was valid and whether it should pay rent. A lawsuit was filed in 2009 and settled this year.

Now Ray’s Pizza is moving out amid a lot of head-shakes and shrugs and what-are-you-gonna-do Little Italy resignation.

You could say Ray’s on Prince Street kept to itself, perfectly content with its place in the constellation where others burned brighter. Just a block away, tourists line up on the sidewalk for a seat in Lombardi’s, waiting for a hostess wearing a microphone headset to call their names from loudspeakers. Wait for a pizza? This was not the Ray’s way, where pies come whole or by the slice, hot from the oven, enjoyed without hurry in a humble booth beneath a hand-painted “Ray’s Gourmet Pizza” board.

The closing of Ray’s would seem to remove from the neighborhood any vestige of the late Ralph Cuomo, its first owner, who once loomed large.

Mr. Cuomo was called Raffie, a shortened version of his Italian first name, Raffaele, and so, in 1959, when he opened a pizzeria in a building he owned with his brother, he named it not Ralph’s, but Ray’s.

“Ralph’s might have sounded, I don’t know, maybe too feminine,” Mr. Cuomo explained, perhaps inexplicably — a girl named Ralph? — [to The New York Times in 1991](http://www.nytimes.com/1991/03/25/nyregion/in-a-pizza-war-it-s-3-rays-against-the-rest.html?src=pm). “Besides, nobody ever called me Ralph.”

He could not have imagined the scene today, with dozens of various Ray’s across the city and beyond. But in the first city phone books printed after he opened, in 1960, there are seven Ray’s Luncheonettes, one Ray’s Bar & Grill, one Ray’s Food Shop and one — count ’em, one — Ray’s Pizza, at 27 Prince.

In the 1960s, Mr. Cuomo briefly opened a second pizza shop, near East 59th Street, but he sold it, and that shop’s new owner, Rosolino Mangano, kept the name Ray’s. [Other Ray’s Pizzas popped up](http://www.nytimes.com/1994/09/17/nyregion/about-new-york-ray-s-pizza-now-called-infamous.html), and Mr. Mangano insisted his was first. “Everybody knows me as Ray,” Mr. Mangano told The Times in 1991. “Nobody ever heard of Ralph Cuomo.”

This is false. Many people had heard of Ralph Cuomo. For instance, the F.B.I., which knew him to be a member of the [Luchese crime family](http://topics.nytimes.com/topics/reference/timestopics/people/l/lucchese_crime_family/index.html) who trafficked in heroin. Mr. Cuomo was arrested on charges of selling heroin in the 1960s and ’70s, and was the subject of a Federal Bureau of Investigation inquiry in the ’90s that involved an informant, [Alphonse D’Arco](http://www.ipsn.org/characters/cuomo/Ray%27s%20Pizza.htm), conducting mob business at Ray’s.

“Approximately the beginning of September 1991, D’Arco observed Cuomo with a .357 magnum pistol in the basement of Ray’s Pizzeria,” according to an agent’s report. But never mind the gun, the informant seems to add — get a load of this place: “In the basement, there are actual tree limbs holding up the beams of the building. These trunks have a polished finish to them.”

Ms. Mistretta, the manager today, was Mr. Cuomo’s cousin, and she waved off questions about the mob connections as ancient history. She prefers to remember Mr. Cuomo by the smiling pictures on the wall, of him at a daughter’s baptism, or standing with his friend Burt Young from the “Rocky” movies.

Martin Scorsese, a former neighbor, signed a picture, along with bygone regulars like Leonardo DiCaprio, who, after breaking out with “Titanic,” once stood patiently while Mr. Cuomo called Ms. Mistretta’s granddaughter, who was around 10 and a breathless fan, and took the phone to say hello. Mark Wahlberg is well remembered among the Ray’s staff for his regular visits, with two bodyguards, for his usual order: chicken Parmesan.

Ms. Mistretta was more or less thrust into the pizza business in her 50s, when Mr. Cuomo began to suffer from what would be a series of debilitating health problems. “This is what he did,” she said, sweeping her hand across the restaurant last week. “I’m following in his instep.”

She is busy now with the seemingly mutually exclusive tasks of looking for space for a new restaurant and for someone to buy all her kitchen equipment and furniture, and she ends many sentences with “What else?”

What is the secret to making good pizza?

“What do you mean?” she asked. “You buy top-grade flour. You buy very good mozzarella.” What else?

The tree limbs are still standing downstairs, eight of them, floor to ceiling. Whether they still support any weight is debatable. What else?

Mr. Cuomo spent some of his later years in prison, and died in 2008. “He was well liked by everybody,” said a former manager at Ray’s, Anthony Pena, 41. “He was a sport. He loved this business. He must be turning in his grave.”

Family disputes aside, the sad fact is that the 2011 version of Little Italy with its five-figure commercial rents is not designed in the interests of mom-and-pop pizza parlors that people come there expecting to see. But Ms. Mistretta remains hopeful that something will come along in the weeks ahead. Ray’s will remain open through the [Feast of San Gennaro](http://manhattan.ny1.com/content/top_stories/147297/feast-of-san-gennaro-begins-in-little-italy), which began on Thursday and ends Sept. 25. After that, who knows?

“Maybe Wahlberg or DiCaprio will come in,” she said, chuckling and then serious. “Don’t put this is the end. You never know.”

Time will tell how long it takes for the fight to begin over who gets to call himself the Now Longest Standing Original Famous Ray’s Pizza of New York.