

Blair Business Mirror

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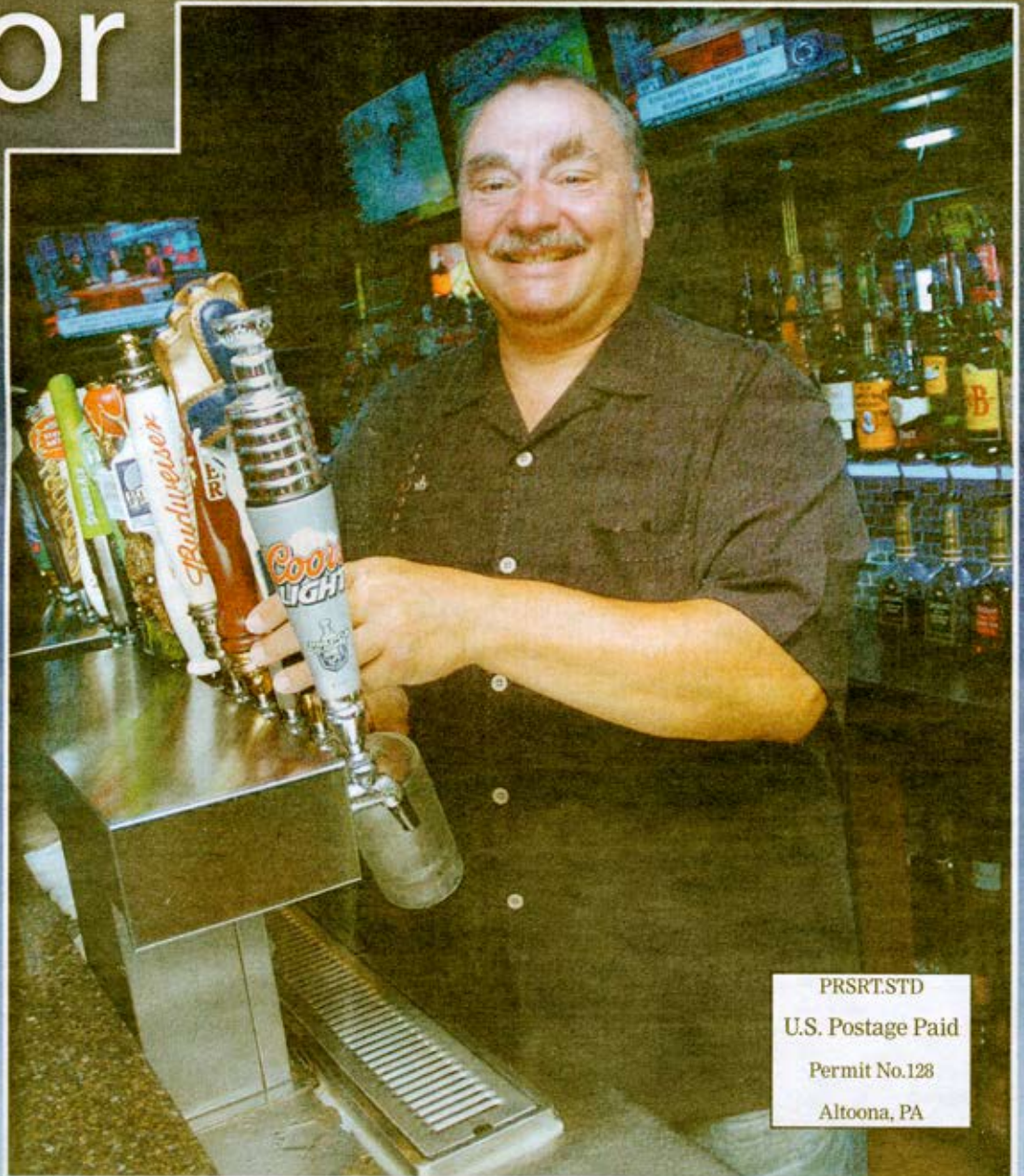
Fifty years

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Al's Tavern marking 50 years of business success

Al Coppeta has been around the block often enough to understand the meaning of the time-worn axiom that "you can't be all things to all people."

But as owner of one of Blair County's most recognizable hospitality businesses – a business that is celebrating its 50th year during 2012 – Coppeta can feel an enduring sense of satisfaction in accomplishing an objective that few others in his industry would have the courage to attempt.

Al's Tavern, which markets itself as "not just another corner bar," has been a destination for people of all ages and motivations. How Coppeta and his family have managed to satisfy such a broad range of customers has been a little bit of luck and a whole lot of attention to detail.

"What we were and what we are has a lot to do with what we determined the local community was looking for," Coppeta pointed out. "It's a formula for success that seems to make sense but is sometimes difficult to maintain. Fortunately, our customers have never been reluctant to share their opinions with us. They've helped to keep us on track."

Customer input has been a key component of Al's Tavern's success since Alfred Coppeta, Al's father, bought the business in 1962.

"It's always been a bar and a restaurant," Al explained. "In the beginning, though, it was more of a truck stop. We served daily specials. It was very much a neighborhood place. People would come in and bring their children. We used to sell bread and milk and anything else that people wanted to buy."

It was a family business in the truest sense of the word. "From the time we first opened our doors, there was a strong emphasis on family involvement," Coppeta acknowledged. "My dad, my mother, aunts, uncles and cousins all played some significant role in what we were doing. That same philosophy exists today. As long as I'm involved, it always will."

Coppeta has fond memories of his days learning the nuances of meeting the public's culinary needs. And some not-so fond memories as well.

"I'd come to work after school and do pretty much whatever needed to be done," he remembers. "We were open six days a week so that every Sunday you had to be here cleaning the restrooms and scrubbing the floors. That was non-negotiable."

In 1968, Coppeta went away to college and then took a job in Cleveland with a company that sold non-food items to supermarkets.

"I had a nice arrangement and was pretty comfortable," he admitted. "In 1972, my dad asked me to come home and run the business. It sounded like a good deal. What I came back for turned out to be a pay cut, no company car and no vacation. And I was still cleaning the restrooms and scrubbing the floors. It was not exactly what anyone would consider glamorous."

Some of the neighborhood dynamics had also changed. A number of the businesses located in close proximity to Al's



Photos by Patrick Waksmunski

Above: Thad McDonough, the son of owner Al Coppeta, serves a customer at the bar in Al's Tavern in Altoona.

At right: Customers dine at the booths in the bar area of Al's Tavern.



Above: Jude Coppeta, another of Al Coppeta's sons, serves customers in the dining room.



Tavern closed or reduced their workforces. The customer base was eroding and Coppeta began to look for alternative ways to create interest.

"We knew we needed to change our business strategy and cater to a different audience," he disclosed. It didn't happen overnight. We remodeled. We concentrated more on our food business and expanded our menu. We became more of a night spot for the bar scene in the mid-'80s but we were careful not to venture so far in that direction that we alienated families from coming here. A lot of people were skeptical that we could balance both objectives. Well, so far so good."

Al's has expanded to accommodate more customers and can now comfortably seat 150. There are many nights that it could probably justify having twice the amount of space. That would be difficult, Coppeta emphasized.

"Our kitchen is small so serving everyone quickly on a busy night can get crazy. The saving grace is that we have a great staff. Most of our people have been with us for long periods of time. They work long hours and they work hard. You really have to love the restaurant business and they do. I consider them part of our family and without them we would struggle."

Despite being somewhat off the beaten path (8th Avenue and 29th Street in one of Altoona's older neighborhoods), Al's is clearly a destination for food and drink aficionados from throughout the county. While getting them there is the initial challenge, keeping them coming back is always at the forefront of Coppeta's motivation.

"Maintaining our reputation is a high priority," he noted. "We need to constantly focus on keeping up with trends and making sure that what we do is consistent. We strive for quality and excellent customer service. It's essential that everyone walks out of here with a smile on their face."

Those are lessons that Coppeta learned from his father.

"My dad led by example. He had a terrific work ethic. He passed that on to me. I really love my job and I hope I've been able to instill that feeling in my family."

Alfred Coppeta, Sr. died in 2003. It was at that point that his son first considered himself to be the man in charge of the business.

"Until then, I always considered myself as someone helping out in the business," he stated. "I didn't need to have a title or any special designation. In a family business, the patriarch is always the head of the family and the head of the business. Everyone else just seems to assume more responsibility. There were things signed-over to me gradually but that didn't change the reality. He was always the boss."

The family and the business have a new patriarch.

"I guess that would be me," Coppeta conceded. "And to tell you the truth, I don't like it. It's daunting. But I'll do my best and hopefully, 50 years from now, we'll still be going strong."

Al's Tavern has been a Member of the Blair County Chamber of Commerce since 2006.