

[From the *Times Argus*]
Wayside Turning 90

(By Susan Allen)

MONTPELIER/BERLIN (literally) –In 1918, the Armistice was signed, ending World War I.

A legend–Ella Fitzgerald–was born.

A first class postage stamp cost 3 cents.

And, of course, the Boston Red Sox won the World Series.

That same year, Effie Ballou opened The Wayside Restaurant, straddling the Montpelier/Berlin town line—not the 160-seat local institution that has become something of a landmark in Central Vermont, but a small, take-out joint that more closely resembled a snack bar.

“In the early days, there were no seats inside the restaurant,” said Brian Zecchinelli, who married into the restaurant business in 1994 when he tied the knot with Karen Galfetti—whose family bought The Wayside in 1966 from the Fishes (who bought it from Effie Ballou in 1945).

“Mrs. Ballou would make some soup at the house, donuts, bring them down and reheat them,” Zecchinelli said.

Today's Wayside serves around 1,000 customers a day—more in the summer, fewer in the winter. Most are locals and many are regulars who eat there so often they know the day of the week by the restaurant's regular daily special.

But The Wayside has become more than a place local Vermonters go for a good, affordable meal (Zecchinelli recently mailed a letter to lawmakers reminding them they can eat three meals a day there for about \$20).

Many statewide and local politicians make sure there's at least one Wayside stop on the campaign tour. Zecchinelli said that's because so many Vermonters from all walks of life can be found there—plenty of votes to woo.

“It's just such a cross section of the community eating here,” Zecchinelli said. “Plumbers, lawyers, teachers, bank presidents the whole mix of customers. You've got rusty old trucks and shining Mercedes in the parking lot.”

The Wayside was also a hot spot for state workers until some years ago. That was due, in part, to the employee meal reimbursement plan that allowed workers to expense meals eaten outside Montpelier. So, Zecchinelli said, some would eat at tables on the Berlin side of the restaurant so they could expense their meal—until an auditor discovered that while the town line passed through the property, the entire restaurant was inside the Montpelier city limits. No more expensing.

Asked what makes the restaurant so special, “You always say you have good employees and good customers,” Zecchinelli said.

But, he said, the reality is something different. It's the house. Ballou lived in a house on the hill just behind The Wayside. When she sold the restaurant to Joseph and Amy Fish (their son George and his wife Vivian took it over in 1954), the house went with the deal.

And when the Galfettis bought the restaurant in 1966, they, in turn, got the house, as did Karen and Brian when they took over.

“Since Day One, the house was always with the restaurant,” said Brian Zecchinelli. “So the owners have always been very hands-on. The fact that the owner has always been able to skip down to The Wayside to give folks a hand, be there during hours when you’re busiest.

“If other businesses want to put a house on the property, go for it,” he advised.

Brian, who previously worked at Milne Travel and Rock of Ages, never expected to go into the restaurant business. Although Karen had also worked elsewhere—E.F. Hutton and Co. and Smith Barney in Burlington—she knew The Wayside was probably in her future.

“It was something I tried and I liked. We’ve enjoyed it,” Brian Zecchinelli said. “We’ve been so active in this business that we can tag team each other.”

The Galfettis and Zecchinellis have put seven additions on the restaurant over the years, and although customers have urged him to expand, Brian said the current size of 160 tables feels like the number to stay with, “a comfortable size.”

He said the best thing about owning The Wayside has been the customers, who truly respond to good food. “You’re only as good as your last meal,” he quipped.

The toughest thing, he noted, has been meeting the bottom line.

“The challenge is keeping costs in line so we can continue to be an affordable place for people to gather,” he said. Almost everything is made on site. The kitchen is large and the smells of freshly baking bread consisting homemade white wheat and rye. Daily specials include full turkey meals, roast beef, maple-cured McKenzie ham and more.

On virtually any day of the week, any time of the day, the parking lot is packed, most of the cars, trucks and motorcycles carrying Vermont license plates.

Zecchinelli said his favorite moment during his years as Wayside owner was the Red Sox rally he hosted after the Sox won the 2004 World Series, noting the last time his team had won was the year The Wayside opened—1918.

“We argued whether The Wayside has been the curse or the Bambino,” he joked.

The restaurant rolled back prices that day, and more than 3,000 people came in to celebrate, “mostly Red Sox fans, but some employees were in Yankee jerseys. That’s OK because we’re baseball fans.”

What will happen to The Wayside in the future, one wonders? It’s impossible to know for sure.

But, Zecchinelli pointed out, his son Jay has been working the register since he was 4.

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