

Life Witout Joey

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Joey Vento, the 71 year-old cheesesteak king who made headlines in 2006 with the “speak English” sign hung in the take-out window of his famous South Philadelphia sandwich shop, Geno’s, died last week. Grandson of Italian immigrants, Vento was tattooed with a confederate flag, which he also proudly displayed on the Harley he drove around town. Vento made as many enemies as allies with his attention-grabbing antics. But all agreed that he was a Philly original, just like his cheesesteak—that beloved meaty, processed cheese-slathered indulgence which is as much a symbol of the city’s enduring character as its palate.

When Vento opened Geno’s in 1966, the city was hardly known as a foodie destination. Cheesesteaks, soft pretzels, hoagies, Tastykakes, and that mystery meat of mystery meats—scrapple—hardly qualified as haute cuisine. In the 90’s all of that changed. Though Georges Perrier had been quietly turning out classic Lyonnais cuisine at Center City’s Le Bec-Fin for decades, he started facing unprecedented competition from upstarts like Stephen Starr whose ever-expanding multi-concept empire has now grown to nearly twenty dining destinations including New York outposts of trendy Buddakan and Morimoto. More recently Marcie Turney and Valerie Safran have spiffed up formerly downtrodden 13th Street with six upscale restaurants and boutiques that run the gamut from Mexican to Mediterranean.

Though the city has emerged as a go-to destination for the fooderati, when it comes to cheeseteaks, keepin’ it real still holds strong cache among locals. When Starr’s high-end Barclay Prime steakhouse began offering a \$100 Kobe-beef-and-foie-gras version of the city’s signature sandwich, folks dismissed it as a shameless publicity stunt. The venerable Four Seasons’ Swann Lounge turns out bite-sized cheesesteak spring rolls, a dainty affair served on porcelain with ketchup and fries. But most folks in the 215 consider the dish strictly for tourists and ladies who lunch.

For diehard traditionalists, the only real cheesesteaks are still found where it all began at either Pat’s King of Steaks, credited with inventing the sandwich in 1933, or Geno’s, given props for upping the ante since Vento had the gall to set up shop across the street

from Pat's. Both meccas are open all night, seven days a week. Pat's chops the meat, Geno's does not.

If you're looking for other distinctions among these famous rib eye rivals, allow me to explain: While the cheesesteak appears to be simple—steak, bread and cheese (usually provolone or Cheez Whiz), served with or without onions—its cultural meanings are not. Where, what, and how one orders his sandwich are matters of pride that run so deep they inspire nearly tribal affiliations. In Boston they ask, how much does he know? In New York, how much is he worth? In Philadelphia, who makes his cheesesteak?

Now that Vento is gone, some predict that cheesesteak supremacy will be liberated from the hyper-local turf war. Signs of that already began to appear a couple of years ago when Nicole DiZio opened Wit or Witout in Northeast Philadelphia, miles away from Passyunk Avenue. In her first year of business Philadelphia Magazine awarded DiZio's cheesesteak its coveted "Best of Philly" title. But not everyone was welcoming to the new kid on the block. Soon after DiZio won the prize, the magazine received a call from an unidentified man threatening to bring her down—his gripe wasn't with DiZio's food but her aspirations to franchise.