



Legacy Business Registry Staff Report

Hearing Date: July 22, 2024

ROCCO'S CAFE

Application No.: LBR-2023-24-034
Business Name: Rocco's Cafe
Business Address: 1131 Folsom St.
District: District 6
Applicant: Michael Rotella, Chef/Partner
Nomination Date: February 26, 2024
Nominated By: Supervisor Matt Dorsey
Staff Contact: Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
legacybusiness@sfgov.org

BUSINESS DESCRIPTION

Rocco's Cafe is an Italian-American style community restaurant known for classic dishes such as linguine with clams, chicken marsala, and grilled polenta. With a focus on preserving history, fostering community, and sharing the joy of Italian dining with all, Rocco's continues to be a gem in San Francisco's culinary landscape. They have cultivated a loyal following of regular customers, as well as attracted new visitors.

The restaurant was established as "Rocco's Fine Food" in 1932 by Rocco Coscarelli. Rocco, an Italian immigrant, fulfilled his dream of opening his own restaurant after several years of working for other Italian restaurants. Demetrios "Jimmy" Simotas began working under Rocco at a young age, eventually taking over the restaurant after his passing in 1962. Ready for retirement, Jimmy passed ownership of the restaurant to Rocco's grandson, Donald "Don" Dial, in 1990. The landlord of the original location in the Excelsior, located at 4581 Mission Street, did not want to extend a lease to a 25-year-old. This led Don to relocate the restaurant to the present location at 1131 Folsom Street in the SoMa neighborhood.

In 2023, business partners Michael Rotella, Scott Beck, and Mitch Penning purchased the brand and business from Don, allowing him to retire on December 31, 2023. The new business partners took over on January 1st, 2024, and have committed to continuing the family restaurant's legacy of serving Italian classics and large portions. The restaurant also regularly gives back to the community, whether partnering with housing associations in the SoMa community or supporting police officers and City workers.

CRITERION 1

Has the applicant operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?

Yes, Rocco's Cafe has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years:

4581 Mission St. from 1932 to 1993 (61 years)
1131 Folsom Street from 1990 to Present (34 years)

CRITERION 2

Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?

Legacy Business Program

Office of Small Business
City Hall Room 140
1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place
San Francisco, CA 94102
(415) 554-6680
legacybusiness@sfgov.org
www.legacybusiness.org





Yes, Rocco's Cafe has contributed to the history and identity of the Excelsior and South of Market neighborhoods and San Francisco.

The Historic Preservation Commission recommended the applicant as qualifying, noting the following ways the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community:

- The business is associated with Italian food.
- Rocco's has attracted many significant customers over the years, and most notably is located within the footprint of Folsom Street Fair. Folsom Street, which attracts 400,000 annual visitors is California's third largest street event.
- The property was identified in the South of Market Area Historic Resource Survey, but was not formally evaluated.
- Rocco's Cafe has been featured in SFGATE, Restaurant Realty Company, San Francisco Magazine, The San Francisco Chronicle, and Hoodline. The restaurant has also been featured on KQED and on Guy Fieri's Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives.
- With regard to racial and social equity, Rocco's Cafe was founded by Italian immigrant Rocco Coscarelli in 1932. For nearly 100 years, the restaurant has persisted, continuing to share Italian culture with the community. Now located in SoMa, the restaurant has continued its commitment to the neighborhood as it rapidly changed. Further, Rocco's Cafe has maintained a presence for over 30 years in one of San Francisco's most prolific queer communities, the Leather & LGBTQ community, where it has ensured to provide a welcome environment to all. The restaurant has a presence each year during the Folsom Street Fair which celebrates the neighborhood's unique and rich LGBTQ kink history.

CRITERION 3

Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?

Yes, Rocco's Café is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION RECOMMENDATION

The Historic Preservation Commission recommends that Rocco's Cafe qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) and recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Lively Italian restaurant serving the community with quick service and large portions.
- Historic "Rocco's Cafe" neon sign dating back to 1945.
- Historic "Welcome to San Francisco" sign inside restaurant dating to 1962.

CORE PHYSICAL FEATURE OR TRADITION THAT DEFINES THE BUSINESS

Following is the core physical feature or tradition that defines the business that would be required for maintenance of the business on the Legacy Business Registry.

- Restaurant featuring Italian cuisine.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the San Francisco Small Business Commission include Rocco's Cafe currently located at 1131 Folsom St. in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
Legacy Business Program

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Small Business Commission

Resolution No. _____

July 22, 2024

ROCCO'S CAFE

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legacybusiness@sfgov.org

Adopting findings approving the Legacy Business Registry application for Rocco's Cafe, currently located at 1131 Folsom St.

WHEREAS, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; or

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for more than 20 years but less than 30 years, has had no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years, has significantly contributed to the history or identity of a particular neighborhood or community and, if not included on the Registry, faces a significant risk of displacement; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and identity; and

WHEREAS, the subject business is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the business; and

WHEREAS, at a duly noticed public hearing held on July 22, 2024, the San Francisco Small Business Commission reviewed documents and correspondence, and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry application; therefore

BE IT RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission hereby includes Rocco's Cafe in the Legacy Business Registry as a Legacy Business under Administrative Code Section 2A.242.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission recommends safeguarding the below listed physical features and traditions at Rocco's Cafe.

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Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business:

- Lively Italian restaurant serving the community with quick service and large portions.
- Historic "Rocco's Cafe" neon sign dating back to 1945.
- Historic "Welcome to San Francisco" sign inside restaurant dating to 1962.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, that the Small Business Commission requires maintenance of the below listed core physical feature or tradition to maintain Rocco's Cafe on the Legacy Business Registry:

- Restaurant featuring Italian cuisine.

I hereby certify that the foregoing Resolution was ADOPTED by the Small Business Commission on July 22, 2024.

Katy Tang
Director

RESOLUTION NO. _____

Ayes –

Nays –

Abstained –

Absent –

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Legacy Business Registry

Application Review Sheet

Application No.: LBR-2023-24-034
Business Name: Rocco's Cafe
Business Address: 1131 Folsom St.
District: District 6
Applicant: Michael Rotella, Chef/Partner
Nomination Date: February 26, 2024
Nominated By: Supervisor Matt Dorsey

CRITERION 1: Has the applicant has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years?

☒ Yes ☐ No

4581 Mission St. from 1932 to 1993 (61 years)
1131 Folsom Street from 1990 to Present (34 years)

CRITERION 2: Has the applicant contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community?

☒ Yes ☐ No

CRITERION 3: Is the applicant committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business, including craft, culinary, or art forms?

☒ Yes ☐ No

NOTES: NA

DELIVERY DATE TO HPC: June 18, 2024

Richard Kurylo and Michelle Reynolds
Legacy Business Program

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City and County
of San Francisco



Board of Supervisors,
District 6

MATT DORSEY

麥德誠

February 26th, 2024

Director Katy Tang, *Via email* <Katy.Tang@sfgov.org>

San Francisco Office of Small Business

City Hall, Room 140

1 Dr. Carlton B. Goodlett Place

San Francisco, CA 94102

Dear Director Tang,

Roccas Cafe is an esteemed establishment that has been an integral part of the San Francisco community since 1990. They have been a staple to the SOMA food scene, providing homestyle Italian cooking with friendly staff who makes everyone feel like a regular.

The business has consistently showcased its dedication to the community by remaining open and serving everyone without prejudice based on factors such as race, sexual orientation, or religion. Additionally, they actively engage with all housing associations in the SOMA housing community and extend support to local police officers and city workers daily during their breakfast and lunch breaks.

Rocco arrived in America in the 1920s with a dream of opening his own restaurant. After running his establishment for over 30 years, he attributes its success to a combination of quality, quantity, and personality. The traditional Italian recipe for success has been passed down to his grandson, Don, who, at the age of 25, opened Rocco's Café in honor of his grandfather.

Preserving the legacy of Roccas Cafe is not just a matter of maintaining a business; it's about safeguarding a piece of San Francisco's history and culture. The community would undoubtedly be diminished if this cherished establishment were to be sold.

Thank you for considering this nomination. I believe that recognizing Rocco's cafe on the Legacy Business Registry would be a fitting tribute to its enduring contribution to the fabric of San Francisco.

Sincerely,

MATT DORSEY

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Matt Dorsey". The signature is stylized, with the first name "Matt" and last name "Dorsey" clearly visible.



Legacy Business Registry Application



Business Information

Business name: Rocco's Cafe

Business owner name(s): Scott Beck

Identify the person(s) with the highest ownership stake in the business

Current business address: 1131 Folsom Street, San Francisco, CA 94103

Telephone: (415) 554 – 0522

Email: roccoscafesf@gmail.com

Mailing address (if different than above):

Website: https://www.roccoscafe.com/

Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/RoccosCafe/ **Twitter:**

7-digit San Francisco Business Account Number (BAN): 1 1 5 3 4 4 7

Do any of these describe your business? (select all that apply)

Requires at least 51% of the business be owned, operated, and controlled by the business designation below.

☐ Immigrant-Owned Business

☐ Owned by Person with a Disability

☒ LGBTQ+-Owned Business

☐ Veteran-Owned Business

☐ Minority-Owned Business*

☐ Woman-Owned Business

**Minority is defined as one or more of the following racial or ethnic groups: American Indian or Alaska Native; Asian; Black or African American; Hispanic or Latino; Middle Eastern or North African; Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander*

Contact Person Information

Contact person name: Michael Rotella

Contact person title: Chef/Partner

Contact telephone: () –

Contact email:

Business Location(s)

List the business address of the original San Francisco location, the start date of business, and the dates of operation at the original location. Check the box indicating whether the original location of the business in San Francisco is the founding location of the business.

If the business moved from its original location and has had additional addresses in San Francisco, identify all other addresses and the dates of operation at each address.

Original San Francisco address:

4581 Mission Street

Zip Code:

94112

Is this location the founding location of the business? (Y/N):

Y

Dates at this location: From:

1932

To:

1993

Other address (if applicable):

1131 Folsom Street

Zip Code:

94103

Dates at this location: From:

1990

To:

Present

Other address (if applicable):

Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From:

To:

Other address (if applicable):

Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From:

To:

Other Address (if applicable):

Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From:

To:

Other address (if applicable):

Zip Code:

Dates at this location: From:

To:

Applicant Disclosures

San Francisco Taxes, Business Registration, Licenses, Labor Laws and Public Information Release.

This section is verification that all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses are current and complete, and there are no current violations of San Francisco labor laws. This information will be verified. A business deemed not current with all San Francisco taxes, business registration, and licenses, or has current violations of San Francisco labor laws, will not be eligible to apply for grants through the Legacy Business Program.

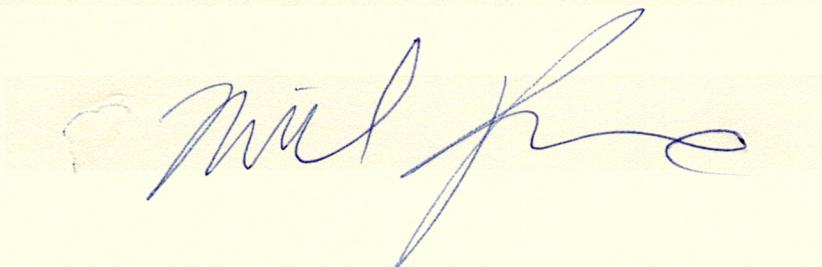
In addition, we are required to inform you that all information provided in the application will become subject to disclosure under the California Public Records Act.

Please read the following statements and check each to indicate that you agree with the statement. Then sign below in the space provided.

- ☒ I am authorized to submit this application on behalf of the business.
- ☒ I attest that the business is current on all of its San Francisco tax obligations.
- ☒ I attest that the business's business registration and any applicable regulatory license(s) are current.
- ☒ I attest that the Office of Labor Standards and Enforcement (OLSE) has not determined that the business is currently in violation of any of the City's labor laws, and that the business does not owe any outstanding penalties or payments ordered by the OLSE.
- ☒ I understand that documents submitted with this application may be made available to the public for inspection and copying pursuant to the California Public Records Act and San Francisco Sunshine Ordinance.
- ☒ I hereby acknowledge and authorize that all photographs and images submitted as part of the application may be used by the City without compensation.
- ☒ I understand that the Small Business Commission may revoke the placement of the business on the Registry if it finds that the business no longer qualifies, and that placement on the Registry does not entitle the business to a grant of City funds.

Name: Michael Rotella

Signature:



Date: 02/22/2024

ROCCO'S CAFE

Written Historical Narrative

INTRODUCTION

a. Describe the business. What does it sell or provide?

Rocco's Cafe is a classic Italian-American-style community restaurant. They focus on homestyle, fresh cooking, serving the Excelsior neighborhood from 1932 to 1993 and the South of Market neighborhood since 1990. Throughout the decades, Rocco's has been a gathering place for the community, welcoming local residents, city workers, and visitors alike. As SoMa evolves, Rocco's remains committed to being a consistent haven, adapting to the changing needs of its guests while staying true to its roots. With a focus on preserving history, fostering community engagement, and sharing the joy of Italian dining for generations to come, Rocco's continues to be a cherished gem in San Francisco's culinary landscape.

b. Describe whom the business serves.

Rocco's Cafe is a staple to the South of Market food scene, providing homestyle Italian cooking with friendly staff members who make everyone feel like a regular.

c. In about 2-5 words (15-30 characters), describe what the business is known for.

Classic Italian dishes.

CRITERION 1: The business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years

a. Provide a short history of the business, including locations and owners.

Rocco's Cafe was established as "Rocco's Fine Food" in 1932 by Rocco Coscarelli. The business was located at 4581 Mission Street in the Excelsior neighborhood.

In 1920, Rocco immigrated from Italy to the United States to pursue his dreams. He worked for years in the North Beach institutions Fior d'Italia, Bimbo's 365 Club, and The Riviera. In 1932, Rocco and his wife, Constantina, opened their own Italian restaurant, Rocco's Fine Food. His sandwiches were served at the 1937 Golden Gate Bridge opening party.¹

¹ "Rocco's Cafe: The Show Goes On," by Kristen Pizzo, Hyperflyer, <https://www.hyperflyer.com/explore/roccos-cafe-the-show-goes-on/>

For three decades, Rocco Coscarelli successfully operated the thriving business built on quality, quantity, and personality. In the early years of the business, Rocco hired a young kid named Demetrios “Jimmy” Simotas who worked for him for years. Jimmy was European like Rocco – tall with blue eyes. Rocco came up with the nickname “Jimmy the Greek” because he was from Greece, and the name stuck.

Over time, Jimmy the Greek worked his way up to head chef and business partner. After Rocco passed away in 1962, Jimmy, who had been Rocco’s business partner for many years by that time, took over solo ownership.

In 1990, Jimmy wanted to retire and pass the business on to Rocco’s grandson, Donald Dial. Don grew up immersed in Italian cooking, helping his family prepare traditional dishes from a young age. He later worked alongside his Uncle Lou at the Italian-American Social Club in San Francisco where three generations of his family had been employed. At 18, Don combined his experience and strong work ethic to enter the restaurant business, quickly rising to General Manager at an Italian restaurant in North Beach. When Jimmy announced his retirement, Don decided it was his time to maintain his grandfather's legacy and own his own restaurant.

Don wanted to take over the business and lease at 4581 Mission Street, but the landlord of the building did not want to extend the lease to a 25-year-old. So, Don found a new location at 1131 Folsom Street in the South of Market neighborhood in November 1990 with the goal of moving Rocco’s to the new location.

When Don closed on the SoMa location, the building was completely rundown, and it took him several months to fix and bring everything up to code. The official opening was in 1991 under the name “Cafe Rocco.” The modified name featuring “cafe” reflected the addition of breakfast to Rocco Coscarelli’s iconic Italian dinner recipes.

Once Don opened the SoMa location, Jimmy the Greek was forced to finish out the Excelsior lease, which expired in 1993. Once Jimmy fully closed the original location in 1993, Don changed the restaurant’s name to Rocco’s Cafe and unified the brand.

In the year 2000, when the building that houses Rocco’s Cafe went up for sale, Don was able to purchase it.

In 2023, business partners Michael Rotella, Scott Beck, and Mitch Penning purchased the business and brand, with Don retaining ownership of the building. Don fully retired on December 31, 2023, and the new business partners took over on January 1, 2024. In operating this iconic SoMa restaurant, they are focused on maintaining the family's legacy and ensuring that the business continues to thrive.

Rocco’s Cafe continues its tradition of serving authentic Italian cuisine, reminiscent of old North Beach. Rocco’s serves classic dishes like Linguine with Clams, Chicken Marsala, and Grilled Polenta, focusing on individual attention and generous portions. All sauces, dressings, marinades, and most desserts are made from scratch to ensure the highest quality and authentic flavors.

b. Provide the ownership history of the business in a consolidated year-to-year format.

1932 to Unknown:	Rocco Coscarelli
Unknown to 1962:	Rocco Coscarelli; Demetrios "Jimmy" Simotas
1962 to 1990:	Demetrios "Jimmy" Simotas
1990 to 1993:	Demetrios "Jimmy" Simotas; Donald Dial
1993 to 2024:	Donald Dial
2024 to Present:	Michael Rotella; Scott Beck; Mitch Penning

c. Describe any circumstances that required the business to cease operations in San Francisco for any significant length of time.

During the COVID pandemic in 2020 and 2021, Rocco's Cafe maintained business operations the best that it could through the various health mandates. Rocco's served food to go for some time, then installed plexiglass and added tables outside.

CRITERION 2: The business has contributed to the neighborhood's history and/or the identity of a particular neighborhood or community

a. Describe the business' contribution to the history and/or identity of the neighborhood, community, business sector, or San Francisco as a whole.

Rocco's Cafe enjoys a loyal following of regular customers, some of whom remember going to Rocco's Fine Food in the Excelsior, who keep coming back to this neighborhood favorite for good homemade Italian food with a lively atmosphere, quick service, and large portions.

The daily specials at Rocco's Cafe pay homage to the legacy of Rocco Coscarelli and Donald Dial, featuring their beloved recipes that have become customer favorites over the years. Indulge in Rocco's timeless classics from the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, such as the delectable and hearty Cioppino, or the extra lemony caper sole. Don's signature dishes, including the savory Chicken Marsala and Chicken Piccata, continue to captivate palates and honor his culinary expertise.

In recognition of the many nighttime establishments in Western SoMa, Rocco's Cafe is open for late night dining on Friday and Saturday nights, from 10 p.m. to 2:00 a.m., thus contributing to the active nightlife in the neighborhood.

The business highlights the rich history of San Francisco with photos all throughout the restaurant, and the business features their neighborhood regulars through photos of experiences they have had at Rocco's.

b. Is the business associated with significant people or events, either now or in the past?

Rocco's has survived multiple decades in the ever-evolving SoMa community. The business is located within the footprint of the annual Folsom Street Fair, which attracts 400,000 visitors and is the third-largest street event in California.

c. How does the business demonstrate its commitment to the community?

Rocco's Cafe participates with all housing associations in the SoMa community and supports their local police officers and city workers every day for their breakfast and lunch breaks.

d. Has the business ever been referenced in the media, business trade publication, and/or historical documents?

Rocco's Cafe has been referenced in the media throughout its history. Following are some key media mentions.

- *"What Are Four Must-Experience South of Market (SoMa) Restaurants?"*
SFGATE
<https://sfinsider.sfgate.com/what-are-four-must-experience-south-of-market-soma-restaurants/>
- *"Sold – Rocco's Legacy Continues"*
Restaurant Realty Company
Circa January 2024
<https://www.restaurantrealty.com/sold-roccos-legacy-continues/>
- *"The Ultimate Guide To Folsom Street's Best Restaurants, Shopping, And Nightlife"*
San Francisco Magazine
February 23, 2023
<https://sanfran.com/soma-folsom-street-restaurant-nightlife-shopping-guide>
- *"The 12 Best Diners in San Francisco"*
San Francisco Magazine
February 20, 2023
<https://sanfran.com/best-diners-san-francisco>
- *"Check, Please! Bay Area reviews: Rocco's Cafe, Maybeck's, Brenda's French Soul Food"*
KQED
May 3, 2018
<https://www.kqed.org/checkplease/19180/check-please-bay-area-reviews-roccos-cafe-maybecks-brendas-french-soul-food>

- *"When it came to restaurants, Ed Lee was a regular guy"*
San Francisco Chronicle
December 12, 2017
<https://www.sfchronicle.com/restaurants/article/When-it-came-to-restaurants-Ed-Lee-was-a-regular-12425600.php>
- *"Rocco's Cafe maintains nostalgic flavor in rapidly changing city"*
San Francisco Chronicle
November 18, 2017
<https://www.sfchronicle.com/bayarea/nativeson/article/Rocco-s-Cafe-maintains-nostalgic-flavor-in-12367536.php>
- *"26 Years In, Rocco's Cafe Still Thrives in a Changing SoMa"*
Hoodline
June 10, 2016
<https://hoodline.com/2016/06/26-years-in-rocco-s-cafe-still-thrives-in-a-changing-soma/>
- *"All Over the Map"*
Diners, Drive-ins and Dives; Season 6, Episode 10
Food Network
June 15, 2009
<https://www.foodnetwork.com/shows/diners-drive-ins-and-dives/episodes/all-over-the-map>

e. Has the business ever received any awards, recognition, or political commendations?

Not applicable.

f. How would the community be diminished if the business were to be sold, relocated, shut down, etc.?

If the business were to close, the SoMa neighborhood, with its limited food options, would be left with no breakfast and lunch restaurant. In addition, city workers would lose a go-to lunch spot that has been popular since 1990.

CRITERION 3: The business is committed to maintaining the physical features or traditions that define the business

a. Is the business associated with a culturally significant building, structure, object, signage, mural, architectural detail, neon sign, or any other special physical feature that defines the business?

The neon “Rocco’s Cafe” sign on the exterior of the building dates back to 1945. In addition, there is a “Welcome to San Francisco” sign inside the restaurant that dates back to 1962.

b. In a few words, describe the main business activity you commit to maintaining.

Restaurant that serves the community and makes everyone feel at home. The business focuses on providing the LGBTQ community with a safe, welcoming space to enjoy good food and company.

c. What is the plan to keep the business open in the long term beyond the current ownership?

Rocco’s Cafe plans to maintain the current employees who have worked in the restaurant since 2002. They also recently expanded their hours to late night and early morning to ensure the community continues to have a reliable place to dine.

d. What challenges is the business facing today?

The business is struggling with surging prices of utilities (water and power), food costs, and labor costs. The owners try to maintain affordable prices and good quality food, but it continues to be a challenge.

Legacy Business Program staff will add the following details:

a. Features or traditions that define the business and should be maintained for the business to remain on the Legacy Business Registry.

Restaurant featuring Italian cuisine.

b. Other special features of the business location, such as if the property associated with the business is listed on a local, state, or federal historic resources registry.

The Planning Department Historic Resource Status of the building at 1131 Folsom Street is “B - Unknown / Age Eligible.”

ROCCO'S FINE FOODS



Telephone 584-5758
4581 MISSION STREET
San Francisco, California

FREE SHOP
efield Rd.
Park

Hamburger
Cheesebur
Pizza Bur
Hot Dog..
Chili Dog
Grilled C
Ham and C
Baked Ham
Ham and E
Bacon and
Bacon and
Italian S
Steak San

Soup of t

P.S.
bel
of
chu
whn
tod









Rocco's C A F E

NO PARKING
CVC 22500E
SFPD 553-1230
TOW AWAY

SMILE
YOU'RE ON
CAMERA



Rocco







EXIT

Welcome to San Francisco
JOSEPH L. ALIOTO, MAYOR

MAXIMUM
OCCUPANCY IS
49 PEOPLE

THESE DOORS TO REMAIN UNLOCKED WHENEVER THE BUILDING IS OCCUPIED

CLOSED

AUTOMATIC
CAUTION
DOOR

ROCCO'S







Bay Area / San Francisco / Food & Drinks

26 YEARS IN, ROCCO'S CAFE STILL THRIVES IN A CHANGING SOMA

By Brittany Hopkins

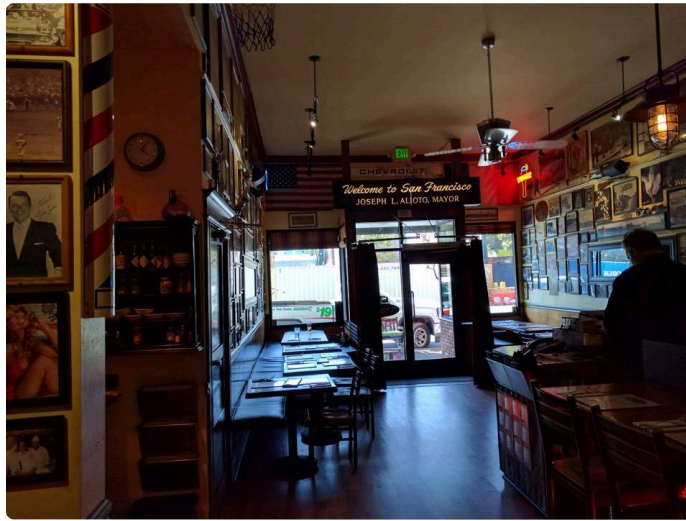
Published on June 10, 2016



Between three recently shuttered SoMa restaurants—[Triptych](#), [El Capitan](#) and [Carafe](#)—and across the street from [111 future apartments](#) sits [Rocco's Cafe](#). Chef Don Dial and many longtime team members have been feeding the neighborhood from the ground floor of 1131 Folsom St. for 26 years, making Rocco's the oldest operating restaurant in the neighborhood, Dial says.

In that time, Dial has seen it all: the AIDS epidemic, which ravaged the health of some of his most loyal customers; the technology booms and busts, which drove people in and out of SoMa's residential buildings; and now, the latest development land grab.

But Dial has been a fighter from the start—and Rocco's ability to withstand the ebbs and flows of its ever-changing neighborhood is no coincidence.



Getting Started

When Dial set out to open his own restaurant, he was 23 and penniless. Over the course of 18 months, he looked at over 100 restaurants from here to Santa Rosa, but he really wanted to be in San Francisco. "I was looking for something that wasn't established, because I had hardly any money at all," he explains.

Brokers were little help. "They said, 'Hey kid, how much money you want to spend?'" When he told them, they responded "'There's no way you're ever gonna make it.' They dropped me," Dial said. "So I started looking around on my own for restaurants that were 'not for sale.' They are for sale, because they have no business. All you have to do is ask."

In addition to an affordable price, Dial wanted a restaurant with an open kitchen. "I'm a big character person. And I knew that if you own a restaurant, you need somebody who works both the front of the house and the back of the house ... I wanted to do both. And the only way to do both is to have people sit in the kitchen and come to me."

His biggest goal was to find a space in a small building—one that he could one day afford to buy. "I'm a third-generation restaurateur, so I know that if you do not

own your own business, they will kick you out. You will lose your lease."



Dial's search finally led to 1131 Folsom St., a two-story building between Seventh and Eighth streets. "The [original owner] was so happy," he said. "[When I came in], it was Friday at about 1pm and there was not one person in here—the place had broken windows. The owner was so excited that when I ordered another beer, he bought it for me."

Dial eventually asked the owner how much he wanted for the place, and was given a price of \$125,000. "So I walked around the restaurant. I saw broken tables, the patio outside is all broken, the windows are broken, downstairs is all infested with rodents ... It was really, really bad. I offered \$25,000 instead, and he kicked me out."

But Dial was persistent. After a trip to the Health Department to read up on all the restaurant's past violations and fines, he managed to negotiate down the price—to \$43,000.

Securing A Future



Dial in the kitchen during Rocco's early days. Photo: Rocco's Cafe/[Facebook](#)

While the restaurant sat in escrow for seven months, Dial spent 10 hours a day, five days a week renovating the space himself, he says. With a fully stocked kitchen, \$1,300 he made from catering a film shoot and all odds against him, he opened his doors for breakfast, lunch and dinner in June 1991.

From day one, business was off to a solid start, thanks to an advertising technique with a unique inspiration. "I used to live in North Beach, and there used to be barkers out there at the strip clubs. The guys who walk by say, 'Hey, come on in! I got the most beautiful ladies in town! Oh my god, you'll love it.'"

"So I took that same theory. I stood out here in my chef's coat every afternoon at 12pm, when people are walking by in their suits and ties going to restaurants. And I'd say, 'Hey guys, listen, come here ... I'm not selling a car, I'm not selling a couch. You'll owe me 20 bucks, that's it. You come in here and if you're not gonna like it, you're out 20 bucks ... And I don't even care if you don't come back.'"

"Who says that?" Dial laughs. "But I had to get 'em hooked."

The technique worked. Soon enough, "everybody was eating here," he says. "Police officers, city officials, industrial workers, residents ... it blew up like crazy. There was a line every single day."

Each night after the restaurant closed, Dial put a few dollars away. Nine years later, when Rocco's entire building went up for sale, he had enough stashed away to make a down payment and purchase it.

A Changing Neighborhood

Maintaining a healthy business in sprawling, ever-evolving western SoMa hasn't always been easy. Rocco's opened during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and Dial watched many loyal customers who lived nearby struggle and succumb to the disease. The tech boom in the late '90s brought in new money and new companies, but drove the neighborhood's manufacturers out. And when all the tech investment dried up, "things got very scary," Dial said. "Empty spaces. No manufacturers. No tenants. No people. No money."

"What saved me, to this day, is that we're not a fad," Dial said. "We're kind of like your grandma's place. It's comfortable to be here; we're something you can count on. We're not gonna sit here and tell you that we're the best. We're not. That's not what we are. But we do a lot of different food here. It's breakfast, it's lunch, it's dinner. It's Italian food. It's American food. My wife says, 'It's whatever Don wants to make.'"



A variety of dishes on the stove. Photo: Rocco's Cafe/**FACEBOOK**

While offering an extensive menu with "something for everybody" helps drive word-of-mouth and attract repeat customers, it's not just a marketing ploy, Dial said. "Everything I make, I want to make it like the best you've ever had. I don't want to make it just to be there ... It's really important to me to make high-quality food in very big portions at a very decent price with really crazy service."

Looking Forward



The photographs, news clippings and kitschy trinkets adorning his walls are mostly crap, Dial said. But if you put enough together, it's art. And believe it or not, there's plenty of room for more.

"This is an industry that always changes," Dial said. "You really, really have to work hard and you have to love it." While he's comfortable with Rocco's being "like your grandma's place," he knows staying on the cutting edge is important.

Dial still refuses to advertise his business via traditional means, but he now has someone managing his social media presence, to help draw in a younger crowd. He's also ventured into catering for office lunches, company parties, weddings and other events.

But overall, Rocco's nature will always be old-school, with "something for everybody" on the menu and an energized Dial inside, working around the clock to make sure everyone is happy—at least for the next eight to ten years, he said.

San Francisco / SoMa - Food & Drinks ▾



LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

HEARING DATE: July 17, 2024

Filing Date: June 18, 2024
Case No.: 2024-005661LBR
Business Name: Rocco's Cafe
Business Address: 1131 FOLSOM ST
Zoning: NCT - Folsom Street Neighborhood Commercial Transit
65-X Height and Bulk District
Within 1/4 Mile of an Existing Fringe Financial Service
Western SoMa SUD
Priority Equity Geographies SUD
Cultural District: SOMA Pilipinas Cultural District
Leather & LGBTQ Cultural District
Block/Lot: 3755/098
Applicant: Michael Rotella
1131 Folsom St
Nominated By: Supervisor Matt Dorsey
Located In: District 6
Staff Contact: Justin Kran - 628-652-7429
Justin.Kran@sfgov.org

Recommendation: Adopt a Resolution to Recommend Approval

Business Description

Rocco's Cafe is an Italian-American style community restaurant. They are known for classic dishes such as linguine with clams, chicken marsala, and grilled polenta. With a focus on preserving history, fostering community, and sharing the joy of Italian dining with all, Rocco's continues to be a gem in San Francisco's culinary landscape. They have cultivated a loyal following of regular customers, as well as attracted new visitors.

The restaurant was established as "Rocco's Fine Food" in 1932 by Rocco Coscarelli. Rocco, an Italian immigrant, fulfilled his dream of opening his own restaurant after several years of working for other Italian restaurants. Demetrios "Jimmy" Simotas began working under Rocco at a young age, eventually taking over the restaurant

after his passing in 1962. Ready for retirement, Jimmy passed ownership of the restaurant to Rocco's grandson, Donald "Don" Dial, in 1990. The landlord of the original location in the Excelsior, located at 4581 Mission Street, did not want to extend a lease to a 25-year-old. This led Don to relocate the restaurant to the present location at 1131 Folsom Street in the SoMa neighborhood.

In 2023 business partners Michael Rotella, Scott Beck, and Mitch Penning purchased the brand and business from Don, allowing him to retire on December 31, 2023. The new business partners took over on January 1st, 2024, and have committed to continuing the family restaurant's legacy of serving Italian classics and large portions. The restaurant also regularly gives back to the community, whether partnering with housing associations in the SoMa community or supporting police officers and City workers.

Staff Analysis

Review Criteria

1. *When was business founded?*

Rocco's Café was founded in 1932 as "Rocco's Fine Foods".

2. *Does the business qualify for listing on the Legacy Business Registry? If so, how?*

Yes— Rocco's Café qualifies for listing on the Legacy Business Registry because it meets all the eligibility Criteria:

- a. Rocco's Café has operated continuously in San Francisco for 92 years.
- b. Rocco's Cafe has contributed to the history and identity of the South of Market neighborhood and San Francisco.
- c. Rocco's Café is committed to maintaining the physical features and traditions that define the organization.

3. *Is the business associated with a culturally significant art / craft / cuisine / tradition?*

Yes—Italian food.

4. *Is the business or its building associated with significant events, persons, and / or architecture?*

Yes—Rocco's has attracted many significant customers over the years, and most notably is located within the footprint of Folsom Street Fair. Folsom Street, which attracts 400,000 annual visitors is California's third largest street event.

5. *Is the property associated with the business listed on a local, state, or federal historic resource registry?*

Not as of the date of this Executive Summary. The property was identified in the South of Market Area Historic Resource Survey, but was not formally evaluated.

6. *Is the business mentioned in a local historic context statement?*

Not as of the date of this Executive Summary.

7. *Has the business been cited in published literature, newspapers, journals, etc.?*

Yes— Rocco's Café has been featured in *SFGate*, *Restaurant Realty Company*, *San Francisco Magazine*, *The San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Hoodline*. The restaurant has also been featured on *KQED* and on Guy Fieri's *Diners, Drive-Ins and Dives*.

Racial and Social Equity Analysis

On July 15th, 2020 the San Francisco Historic Preservation Commission adopted [Resolution No. 1127](#) centering Preservation Planning on racial and social equity. Understanding the benefits, burdens, and opportunities to advance racial and social equity that proposed Preservation Planning documents provide is part of the Department's Racial and Social Equity Initiative. This is also consistent with the Mayor's Citywide Strategic Initiatives for equity and accountability and with the Office of Racial Equity, which required all Departments to conduct this analysis.

The Legacy Business Program is deeply intertwined with these goals. One of the primary purposes of the Legacy Business Program is to maintain San Francisco's cultural fabric and to foster civic engagement and pride by assisting long-operating businesses remain in the city. The Legacy Business Registry was established to recognize longstanding, community-serving businesses that are valuable cultural assets of the city. These businesses, ranging from restaurants to art galleries to tire shops to community shelters, are key to sustaining the racial and social diversity in San Francisco and adding to the identity and character of our city and the many communities within it.

Rocco's Café was founded by Italian immigrant Rocco Coscarelli in 1932. For nearly 100 years, the restaurant has persisted, continuing to share Italian culture with the community. Now located in SoMa, the restaurant has continued its commitment to the neighborhood as it rapidly changed. Further, Rocco's Café has maintained a presence for over 30 years in one of San Francisco's most prolific queer communities, the Leather & LGBTQ community, where it has ensured to provide a welcome environment to all. The restaurant has a presence each year during the Folsom Street Fair which celebrates the neighborhood's unique and rich LGBTQ kink history.

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business

Location(s) associated with the business:

Current Locations:

- 1131 Folsom Street (1993-Present)

Previous (No Longer Extant) Locations:

- 4581 Mission Street (1932-1993))

Recommended by Applicant

- Lively Italian restaurant serving the community with quick service and large portions.
- Historic “Rocco’s Café” neon sign dating back to 1945.
- Historic “Welcome to San Francisco” sign inside restaurant dating to 1962.

Additional Recommended by Staff

- None

Basis for Recommendation

The Department recommends the Historic Preservation Commission adopt a resolution recommending the business listed above be adopted by the Small Business Commission to the Legacy Business Registry.

ATTACHMENTS

Resolution

Legacy Business Registry Application:

- Application Review Sheet
- Section 1 – Business / Applicant Information
- Section 2 – Business Location(s)
- Section 3 – Disclosure Statement
- Section 4 – Written Historical Narrative
 - Criterion 1 – History and Description of Business
 - Criterion 2 – Contribution to Local History
 - Criterion 3 – Business Characteristics
- Contextual Photographs and Background Documentation



HISTORIC PRESERVATION COMMISSION DRAFT RESOLUTION

HEARING DATE: July 17, 2024

Case No.: 2024-005661LBR
Business Name: Rocco's Cafe
Business Address: 1131 FOLSOM ST
Zoning: NCT - Folsom Street Neighborhood Commercial Transit
65-X Height and Bulk District
Within 1/4 Mile of an Existing Fringe Financial Service
Western SoMa SUD
Priority Equity Geographies SUD
Block/Lot: 3755/098
Applicant: Michael Rotella
1131 Folsom St
Nominated By: Supervisor Matt Dorsey
Located In: District 6
Staff Contact: Justin Kran - 628-652-7429
Justin.Kran@sfgov.org

ADOPTING FINDINGS RECOMMENDING TO THE SMALL BUSINESS COMMISSION APPROVAL OF THE LEGACY BUSINESS REGISTRY NOMINATION FOR ROCCO'S CAFE CURRENTLY LOCATED AT 1131 FOLSOM ST, BLOCK/LOT 3755/098.

WHEREAS, in accordance with Administrative Code Section 2A.242, the Office of Small Business maintains a registry of Legacy Businesses in San Francisco (the "Registry") to recognize that longstanding, community-serving businesses can be valuable cultural assets of the City and to be a tool for providing educational and promotional assistance to Legacy Businesses to encourage their continued viability and success; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has operated in San Francisco for 30 or more years, with no break in San Francisco operations exceeding two years; and

WHEREAS, the subject business has contributed to the City's history and identity; and

WHEREAS, the subject business is committed to maintaining the traditions that define the business; and

WHEREAS, at a duly noticed public hearing held on July 17th, 2024, the Historic Preservation Commission reviewed documents, correspondence and heard oral testimony on the Legacy Business Registry nomination.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends that Rocco's Cafe qualifies for the Legacy Business Registry under Administrative Code Section 2A.242(b)(2) as it has operated for 30 or more years and has continued to contribute to the community.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby recommends safeguarding of the below listed physical features and traditions for Rocco's Cafe.

Locations

Current Locations:

- 1131 Folsom St (1990-Present)

Previous (No Longer Extant) Locations:

- 4581 Mission St (1932-1993)

Physical Features or Traditions that Define the Business

- Lively Italian restaurant serving the community with quick service and large portions.
- Historic "Rocco's Café" neon sign dating back to 1945.
- Historic "Welcome to San Francisco" sign inside restaurant dating to 1962.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission's findings and recommendations are made solely for the purpose of evaluating the subject business's eligibility for the Legacy Business Registry, and the Historic Preservation Commission makes no finding that the subject property or any of its features constitutes a historical resource pursuant to CEQA Guidelines Section 15064.5(a).

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the Historic Preservation Commission hereby directs its Commission Secretary to transmit this Resolution and other pertinent materials in the case file 2024-005661LBR to the Office of Small Business on July 17, 2024.

Jonas P. Ionin
Commission Secretary

AYES:

NOES:

ABSENT:

RECUSE:

ADOPTED: July 17, 2024