

Hot dog dynasty enduring

Matriarch's stability alive in Coney Island

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It was only right that the funeral cortege of Catherine Tsagarelis, 92, should have passed by George's Coney Island yesterday. Mrs. Tsagarelis and her husband, George, opened the well-loved Worcester hot dog establishment in 1929, and she worked there full time until slowed down by a stroke in 1992. The business was closed yesterday out of respect for the death of the matriarch, but the familiar 40-foot-tall neon sign of a hand gripping a mustard-slathered hot dog was turned on, the neon droplets falling as the silver and black hearse motored slowly by on its way to Hope Cemetery.

Lunch-goers lured by the illuminated sign were disappointed at finding the restaurant doors closed, and saddened when they read the notice of bereavement in the window. "She was a staple," said Greg Graham, an electrician who has been eating at Coney Island for more than 40 years. "I don't usually miss a lunch here when I'm working in the area." "The did a great job," said Greg Kazarian, 45, who turned up with daughters Jennifer and Emily, 11 and 9. "I've been coming here since I was a kid and you could get three for a dollar. It's something that has stood the test of time." There has been a lunch counter at the Southbridge Street location since 1918. After buying the business in 1929, George and Catherine quickly focused on the humble wiener as their main menu item. In 1938 they renovated the restaurant in the utilitarian art deco style that it boasts today, with its chrome-edged red formica tables, lime and orange sherbet walls, red mosaic floor and straight-backed wooden booths. Nowadays the jukebox plays CDs, not vinyl records, and the \$1.05 you'll pay for a dog would have fed a couple of hungry families in 1929 when the wieners were a nickel a piece; otherwise, Coney Island is about as eternal as the modern world gets. And Mrs. Tsagarelis was a big part of that longevity.

"She had this insurmountable energy," her granddaughter Kathryn Kelleher said. "She worked all day and night, sometimes to 3 in the morning, and she still had time for family, church and friends. She was a woman ahead of her time. When we were growing up, other grandmothers would be home baking baklava and spanakopita. She'd be either running Coney Island or scooping us up and driving to Bridgeport or New York City or the Cape for a swim."

George Tsagarelis died in 1980, and the famous Coney Island sign remained an affectionate connection between the widow and her dead husband.

"That was my husband's hand," Mrs. Tsagarelis explained in 1981. "He wanted that kind of sign, and held up a hot dog. Somebody took a picture and we had the sign made." Coney Island is also famous for the wooden booths into which so many generations of Worcesterites have cut their names over the years. Mrs. Tsagarelis frowned on the writing of new graffiti, but hesitated to have the old carvings erased or covered over. "I don't think I should," she told a reporter. "I've seen men bring in their grandchildren to have hot dogs and show them the initials they carved into the booths when they were kids themselves."

Mrs. Tsagarelis preferred her hot dogs well done, with a little mustard, and had at least one a day. When she and her husband had the time, they would eat out at their favorite Worcester restaurants,

which included Putnam and Thurston's, the Eden Gardens, the Montrose and El Morocco. All were fine establishments in their time, but it's interesting to note that all are long gone. George's Coney Island, however, has endured through a depression, two world wars and a dozen presidents. There's a moral there, no doubt.

What is Coney Island's secret? The between-wars ambience of the building? The unapologetically splendid sign? The secret chili sauce? The American love affair with the hot dog? All may have had a part to play in the business' success, but Kathryn Kelleher also thinks that the lady whose cortege passed along Southbridge Street yesterday made Coney Island.

“No matter who came in – politicians, presidents or banks, the homeless – she treated everyone the same,” Mrs. Kelleher said. “And we had people at the wake tell us that he would give away food during the Depression to boys from the Boys Club who didn't have a nickel to buy a hot dog. People remember that.”

Her mild stroke of eight years ago forces Mrs. Tsagarelis to give up her two pleasures, driving her Cadillac and building frankfurters at the family business. But she stayed involved.

“To the very end she wanted to know about the business, she would offer advice and she was thrilled that the family was still in it,” Mrs. Kelleher said. “When I told her that our children plan to work there, that brought a smile to her face. She really lived for Coney Island,” she said.