Steak wars

Pat's and Geno's are friendly enemies

By Laurie Hollman
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First there was Pat's. Then many years, and thousands of steak sandwiches later, came Geno's.

And so a crossroads in South Philadelphia began to sizzle with competitive capitalism. And with time, legends about Pat's Steaks and tents about Geno's grew, as intertwined.

And those who partook of their fare saw them as sparring definitively across the dinner table of Ninth and Passyunk. Pat's called itself "King of Steaks." Geno's produced a T-shirt, "Ace of Steaks." Pat's put tables outside, Geno's put tables inside. It seemed one was always trying to outdo the other.

And the people spoke of a great rivalry, and they all had their own opinions about which cheesesteak was better:

"Rocky came to Pat's. He didn't go to Geno's."

"Geno's because it's clean, and they've got better food." "Pat's. It doesn't matter whether it's clean or not." "Geno's, man, less grease." But wait a minute, wait a minute. Let's go back to this great rivalry between the two palaces of prodigious protein.

It's baloney. The owners say they're friends. The peanut butter and jelly of the cheesesteak world. The salt and pepper of South Philly. The steak and, uh, oh yeah, cheese of the Delaware Valley.

Well, no need to overdo it here. "We're friends. I'd invite him to my house for dinner," Joe Vento, owner of Geno's, declares. "Joe and I have been friends since we were kids," says Frank Civieri, owner of Pat's.

"There is no competition," he adds. "We're number one." Let's set the scene here: It's lunchtime, Ninth and Passyunk. Women in Lyra or linen and men in business suits and ties belly up to a window in a white building with tomato-red words that look like a child's rendering of a castle. "Pat's King of Steaks," say the signs. There is a constant refrain of "cheese with" and "cheese without," as people order cheesesteaks with or without onions.

Across the street, the faithful flock to a white building that looks like a Mediterranean, if there is such a thing. That's Geno's. That's where the dominant colors are reminiscent of some tropical drink made of lime, orange and cream.

When darkness descends, neon lights up the street, turning customers faintly yellow and the whole scene surreal, as a steady flow of limousines, Chevrolets and Hondas spits cheesesteak lovers out onto the curb all night long.

That's where Joe Vento is standing now. On the curb, his (See STEAKS on 6D)
Friendly fire
in S. Phila.
steak wars

STEAKS, from 1-B
side of the street. An engaging man
with a boxer's build and his wife's
name tattooed with a heart on his
forearm, Vento claims he has never
ventured onto Pat's pavement. Not in
25 years. He is sipping coffee when
Frank Olivieri Jr., Olivieri's 27-year-
old son, drives by.
Olivieri has the broad shoulders of
a wrestler, the cooking skills of a
gourmet chef and a disposition as
sweet as ice cream. He is off to get
lettuce and tomatoes for Pat's, but
Vento doesn't know that. Olivieri
yells: out of the car window, "Uncle
Joey, don't say anything bad about
me."

There's no relation, but Vento
grins, "How can I say anything bad
about you? You're my nephew."

Olivieri drives off, and Vento
mulls his departure. Leaving at
lunch time. Hmmm. That's some-
thing he'd never do.

Bread and butter. Friends.

Inside Geno's, everything is so
spotless your mother could eat off
the floors. The grill is clean. The
blue tile is shiny. The piney wood
looks polished. Vento is one serious
guy about cleanliness.

But hey, no one ever said you had
to ooze grease all over the grill and
the floor and yourself to make a good
cheesesteak. Ahem, ahem. Even if
you were to claim that Pat's steak is
better — and, you'd only be doing
that for the sake of argument, right?
— Vento says, "I'm cleaner. Cleanli-
ness comes before good food."

And while we're at it, while we're
touring Geno's — the name Vento
used for his shop and then for his
son — the owner explains how the
quality of the steer ribeye steak he
uses is better than the stuff they use
across the street. How the French
fries are fresher. How varying the
menu by offering pizza and ice
cream is the wave of the future. How
he doesn’t let the steak pile up on the
grill like some places he knows.

Maybe the one across the street?
How he hasn't followed Pat's but has
set the pace of their competition.
The combatants at Ninth and Passyunk: Geno's, at left, and Pat's. Despite their often hard-nosed

After 25 years in business, Vento says, "here I am, and as far as I'm concerned, you cannot mention his name without mentioning me."

Now, over to the other side of the street, where the kitchen is more crowded and less open, and the grill is about 60 years old. The better to make cheesesteak, the Olivieri say.

"All this clean, best of clean, it's because he's not doing the business," Olivieri, the elder, says of the man across the street.

"As clean as he is," says Olivieri Jr., "that's how we are."

Standing smartly under the awning of his own establishment like a maitre d' at a fancy restaurant, bearded and neat with a glint of humor in his eyes, Olivieri outlines Pat's strong points. Its duration, for one thing. And its reputation. The pictures of Bogart, Louis Armstrong, Jimmy Durante and other celebrities hanging on the ceiling commemorate people who have really visited Pat's.

"Every one of these pictures has Pat or me in it," Olivieri says. He pauses. "Go look at Joe's pictures." And incidentally, about that sign Vento has under one of his windows, the one that says, "the best."

"I mean, he's got the best? What does that mean? Who said it?"

"He did," Olivieri flatly declares. "We," he enunciates carefully, "sell more accidentally than he does on purpose."

It all started with Pasquale Olivieri and a steak sandwich. Of that, there is no dispute.

"Pat's was first. I'm not going to question it at all," Vento says.

The oft-told story is that in 1930 or 1932 - accounts vary - Pat Olivieri got tired of eating the hot dogs he sold at the stand he ran with his brother Harry, Frank Olivieri's father. So Harry got some steak thinly sliced. Pat put it on the grill and slipped it into a roll. A cabdriver was intrigued - and hungry - and the steak sandwich was born.

Soon after, Olivieri Jr. recounts, Pat's moved across the street to the building it's in now.

Then along came Vento's father, James, says his son. He opened his own stand first at Passyunk and Wharton, then on the same corner as Geno's and finally where the Satellite Auto Body Shop now stands on Passyunk.

"Dad started with hot dogs, fishcakes and pork. Then Pat took pork, and my father retaliated with steak," Vento maintains.

The younger Vento scraped together enough money to open Geno's in 1966. He knows some people try to link him to the misdeeds of his father - who was known as "Jimmy Steaks" - or to his brother Steven, both of whom went to jail. "People were against me first for my name, second because they thought this is all drug money. And third because of Pat's."

"I went through a lot," he says. "Now, if I was all that bad, how did I get all this? How bad could I have been if I went this far?"

Here's where the story gets as tricky as eating raw oysters.

As it has been written, and as the Olivieris recount, Joe Lorenzo, who had worked at Pat's since he was a
competition, the restaurants' owners say, they remain friends.

Kid, couldn't stomach another steak sandwich. So, in the same spirit as Pat made his first steak sandwich, he put cheese on steak, and voilà: The cheesesteak was born. This was in the early '50s. Later, Olivieri came up with the idea of Chez Whiz to speed things up.

But to hear Vento tell it, he, not the Olivieris, brought cheese to Ninth and Passyunk. He doesn't say he was the first to make a cheesesteak, no. He concedes Pat's might have done that. They just didn't do it there. He, Joey Vento, brought American and provolone to this corner of the world.

Then Pat's started with Cheez Whiz.

"And now, it tumbles over to my end," Vento says. "Now, I've got a problem. I don't like it, but people do. I put it in."

Olivieri's reaction to this account? "He didn't invent no cheesesteak."

And on and on it goes.

Some people who know Vento and the Olivieris say that the competition between Pat's and Geno's is really just for show and that when it gets right down to it, they can criticize each other, but they don't let outsiders criticize them.

They can even be complimentary. Olivieri Jr. says of Vento that, excluding Pat's, "If there was a steak I'd eat in Philadelphia, it would definitely be his."

And Vento says of Olivieri, "I guess I've got to thank him for what I've got."

He walks around the corner to the side of Geno's, all the while describing how he instigated controversy by advertising himself as "the number one for cleanliness." Followers of Pat's found that as hard to accept as liver, and Olivieri retaliated with his own banners proclaiming Pat's the best. Then the two men made peace and were supposed to take down their signs. Vento says that he removed his but that Olivieri didn't remove his.

So in the dead of night, Vento added a little something to a sign on the side of Geno's. He points to the words, "known for quality and cleanliness," and smiles with ineffable joy.

Steak and cheese. Friends.