

Ask Pittsburgh native Brian Rock what comes to mind when someone mentions his former hometown and he quickly rattles off these favorites: Steelers, Penguins, Pirates, South Side, Strip District, and the iconic Primanti Bros.

"Whenever I travel back to Pittsburgh I always make sure I stop by and eat at least one meal at Primanti's," says Rock, who now lives in Woodbridge, Virginia, just outside Washington, D.C.

the Strip District and sold sandwiches to truckers and other blue-collar workers on the go. Later, he expanded it to a restaurant along 18th Street, where his other brothers, Dick and Stanley, and his nephew, John DePriter, a cook, joined the business. Joe moved to California in the 1940s for health reasons and Dick, Stanley, and John carried on the tradition for the next three decades.

After Stanley and John passed away in the early 1970s, Dick, who was near-

# PRIMANTI

By Daniel Casciato

## A Must-Eat Tradition Since 1933

"There's something about it that just can't be duplicated."

His fraternity brother from Duquesne University, Erik Gerhard, concurs. "Primanti's always reminds me of late nights in college with old friends," says Gerhard, now an attorney in Harrisburg. "We used to frequent the one on 19th and Carson in the South Side, which was a block from my apartment. However, the caricatures of famous Pittsburghers make the Strip District location stand out most."

Primanti Bros. remains a special place for Pittsburghers and visitors alike. And to think, the 78-year-old restaurant almost closed its doors for good in 1974.

Primanti Bros. actually got its start at the height of the Great Depression in 1933 when Joe Primanti opened a cart in



Photo by Blacktie

Jim Patrinos

ing retirement age, was anxious to sell the family business. There were no takers and a "Closed" sign marred the front door of the once-popular restaurant for several months.

That is, until Jim Patrinos, who owned a local diner, came knocking.

Only 24 years old at the time, Patrinos, who used to visit Primanti's at least twice a year, was surprised to see the place closed and was urged by a friend to purchase and reopen it.

"I decided to get in touch with Dick Primanti and soon became the new owner," recalls Patrinos, who reopened the restaurant in 1975 after making

Primanti Bros.  
signature sandwich



# PRIMANTI BROS.®

some minor modifications. “I tried to keep everything as original as possible. I bought all of the bread and meats from the same vendors. We had a former employee show us how to make the cole slaw. I didn’t want to change a thing, and hopefully I haven’t.”

One change Patrinos did make was regarding the hours of operation. Primanti’s used to be open from 1:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. to accommodate the truckers and other overnight workers. After a year, he decided to stay open all night, and since then it has remained open 24 hours.

With the success of that location, Patrinos expanded its operations and opened a second location in Oakland, near the University of Pittsburgh. Later, he added locations in downtown Pittsburgh, the South Side, Market Square, and Three Rivers Stadium. In 1999, Patrinos expanded to the

suburbs and added a location in Robinson with an enlarged menu. Over the next 11 years, he opened eight more restaurants, in North Versailles, Pleasant Hills, Cranberry, and elsewhere. Today, Primanti Bros. has 20 locations

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The Primanti Bros. founders, ca. 1933, behind the counter (from left): Joe Primanti, John Depriter, [unidentified], Stanley Primanti, [unidentified], and Dick Primanti

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## Primanti Bros.

altogether, including three in Ft. Lauderdale, where Patrinos has a second home.

Turn on your television during any nationally televised sporting event in Pittsburgh, and you can bet the cameras will show a clip of Primanti Bros. That national attention began way back in the mid-1970s when the University of Pittsburgh football team was on its way to a national championship and the Steelers were in the midst of a dynasty.

But it wasn't until an article appeared in *Penthouse* magazine in the early 1980s that more people began to take notice of the Pittsburgh restaurant with its unique sandwiches stuffed with cole slaw and french fries. A freelance writer for the *Wall Street Journal* was planning to run an article about Primanti's, but the piece was nixed.

A year later, he pitched the same idea to *Penthouse*, which ran the article. Since then, the Pittsburgh landmark eatery has been featured in hundreds of publications and television programs, including shows on PBS, the Food Network, the Travel Channel, and the

Discovery Channel. Most recently, it was featured on the Travel Channel's *101 Tastiest Places to Chow Down*—and Primanti's was crowned as having America's "Number One Sandwich."

In 2007, Primanti Bros. was named an American Classic by the James Beard Foundation in Washington, D.C., a nonprofit organization that recognizes and honors excellence among those working in the food and beverage industry.

"I was really overwhelmed by the award," Patrinos says. "The organizers compiled a little film that they showed at the ceremony. It was very nice and I was very honored."

Even the City of Pittsburgh has honored its heritage by renaming the street on which the original restaurant sits as Primanti Way. While Primanti's has

received its fair share of local and national fame, Patrinos credits former Pittsburghers and current residents for the national exposure.

"We've been very fortunate to have received all this national attention, but I feel what's given us the best exposure nationally are the people who have left Pittsburgh," he says. "When the holidays arrive, everyone comes back to visit their families, and on their to-do list is going to Primanti's for a sandwich. That's why we're so busy during the holidays."

Most of Patrinos's time is spent at the original Strip location. "We do have operation managers in these other stores, but the Strip is still the yeast of all the stores," he says. "As the Strip goes, so goes all the other stores. I'm in

touch with them on a daily basis, by phone or in person. The Strip is the original location and it's where people want to go, so I am very protective of that location. It's special to me. I'm there at least one day a week, usually on a Saturday when it's the busiest. I like to help out and also keep the cus-

tomers entertained."

While the other locations offer patrons an expanded menu, including salads, pizzas, and pasta, Patrinos kept the Strip location all original. He wanted to stay true to the roots of the founders, and preserve that sense of nostalgia among the customers.

"Nothing changed in the Strip," he says. "It's the only location where we only serve the original sandwiches. We tried to keep it as original as possible."

The menu consists of 20 different meats to put on the original sandwich, plus the cole slaw and fries.

Patrinos loves the location in the Strip District. "This is the hub of the city," he says. "The traffic of people who



*A busy night behind counter in the early days*

*Continued on p. 32* ▶

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## Primanti Bros.

Continued from p. 18

come through here is just amazing. I have now been there for 36 years, more than half of my life. The Strip is very much a part of my life. We're happy to be in the Strip."

Patrinos has certainly seen changes throughout the Strip, such as the transformation from a wholesale to a retail destination and the influx of nightclubs in the late 1990s to its current transition into a residential living destination.

"It seems like it has its peaks and valleys, but no matter what happens, the marketplace takes care of itself," he says. "I think the Strip has rediscovered itself to become more of a vibrant shopping area again. The keys to this growth were places like Wholey Fish. They were the pioneers in getting other retailers there. Penn Mac has also done a great job. There were many who were part of the transformation of the Strip District into a destination."

When Patrinos talks about the Strip location, he always mentions his long-time employee, Toni Haggerty of Bethel Park, who has worked for him since he reopened the Strip's Primanti's. Patrinos speaks fondly of Haggerty. "When I started expanding in the 1980s, she was there almost every day," he



Photo by Blacktie

Toni Haggerty

says. "I took care of the nights and she took care of the days. She has been a large part of the success and part of the essence of that location. She's the life and soul of that place."

Haggerty describes Patrinos as a brother to her. "He's like family and he's such a wonderful person to work for," she says. "And he's great to the customers." Haggerty, who works five days a week, ten hours day, says what keeps her coming back are those customers. "I've seen the same faces here for over 30 years," says Haggerty, who also has



The original Primanti Bros. storefront

two brothers, a niece, a sister-in-law, and a daughter who works with her. "I love to deal with the people and I know many of them on a first-name basis."

While she has helped Patrinos open up other Primanti's restaurants, she says that the Strip location will always remain her favorite. "I love it here in the Strip," she says. "I think everyone loves this particular location the best because we kept it original."

As he looks ahead to the future of his restaurant, Patrinos has no plans for expansion to other cities, despite the dozens of calls per month inquiring about franchises.

"Our growth has been very happenstance," he says. "We don't have a plan to expand at the moment, but maybe the next generation will take us to the next level. I'm sure the Primanti family is surprised at the level we took it to. For now, we like to keep it special and keep it unique."

For more information on Primanti Bros., visit [www.primantibros.com](http://www.primantibros.com). 

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