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Food icon returns afresh - wine, meatballs and all

Old East Dallas: Jimmy's reopens doors, a year after fire destroyed it

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Old East Dallas welcomed back an old friend Saturday.

Jimmy's Food Store, an almost 40-year-old neighborhood icon that drew customers from hundreds of miles away, opened its doors for the first time since an October 2004 fire destroyed the store at Bryan Street and Fitzhugh Avenue.

Even though the family-owned grocery has a different look, patrons said it was like coming back home. "It's a good feeling," said chef Alessio Franceschetti. "You go back to home. You go back to the roots." Jimmy's roots reach back to 1966.

It's grown and changed with the neighborhood - providing the basics but also carrying food that caters to Vietnamese, Cubans and other Hispanics, said co-owner Paul DiCarlo.

In the late 1990s, it started specializing in the Italian products it's now known for - wine from all parts of Italy, famed Italian sausage, meatballs and sandwiches, as well as a variety of products not found anywhere else in Dallas.

"I found my own roots," Mr. DiCarlo said.

The fire, caused by an electrical short, gutted the store, causing about \$241,000 in damage. It cost about \$275,000 to reopen, Mr. DiCarlo said.

While Jimmy's temporarily operated in the Quadrangle, the owners knew where they would reopen permanently, Mr. DiCarlo said.

They kept the basic original structure but changed the look of the store to match the 1920s period when the building was built. Floors are concrete instead of tile. The ceiling is open. Inside walls are red and green. A portion of the tin ceiling was salvaged.

Mr. DiCarlo likened it to "a New York-style mom-and-pop grocery store."

The refurbished store adds about 1,000 square feet of space. Some of the products have been rearranged and cases changed.

"This store looks good," Sonja McGill told Mr. DiCarlo as she waited for her sandwich.

"It was a blessing in disguise," she said of the fire.

The contents of the store after the grand opening will still be the same with a few changes.

The biggest difference for Mr. DiCarlo is the absence of his mother, Marie Anna Duca DiCarlo, who made the shop's famous meatballs. She died in February.

Her presence is still felt. She gave input on changes before she died, and others have been trained to make her meatballs. Her picture hangs near the front doors.

Other changes include several small tables near the checkout area. Hungry customers no longer have to eat their sandwiches outside in their car.

“People always wanted a place to sit and get away,” he said.

Brian and Shelley Maher of Irving shopped there Saturday morning. After living in Rome, they come here for authentic ingredients and wine.

“It’s kind of a fun, funky thing to do on a Saturday morning,” Mr. Maher said.

One couple drove by the place for years and came Saturday morning for the first time after hearing about the fire. Sharon Kirksey was hooked.

“I’ll be back,” she said.

Neighborhood residents like Sally and Peter Warlick were equally excited about the return of the joint they considered their own.

Mr. Warlick said, “All of East Dallas is smiling.”

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PHOTO(S): (MILTON HINNANT/Staff Photographer) Darren Carollo shops at Jimmy’s with his 1-year-old son Noah. Jimmy’s, a longtime Old East Dallas fixture that burned down in October 2004, welcomed back customers Saturday to a store rebuilt at the same site but recast in a different look.