

The Restaurant?  
January 2006

With my sincere apologies to Charles Dickens and his descendants....

It is the best of restaurants, it is the worst of restaurants; it is Italian cuisine at its finest, it is a greasy spoon; it serves everyone, it serves no one. (You get the idea). This culinary enigma is known far and wide in the North Country as Artoro's Italian Ristoranti, that is from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. Otherwise from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. it is known as the Lunch Wagon Café. Same building, same kitchen, same owner, same cook, different doors. So if you go to the Lunch Wagon/Artoro's Fine Italian Ristoranti, don't be surprised if you see a long line outside the doors. The tables may or may not be full; it may be just a crowd of people suffering from a bout of indecision

For example, Our friend Lil took her friend Bill, from downstate, there for both breakfast and dinner and never had anything to eat either time. Now I must digress a moment and introduce you to our friend Lil.

If you haven't met Lil, her full name is 'Diamond Lil'. I don't really know her last name, but that doesn't matter because as you may have noticed in these stories, few people have last names. Why is that? Because we don't care about last names up here and that is cool, because it makes writing a lot easier. Anyway, Diamond Lil is 'Diamond Lil' because of the chunk of ice she always wears. (For you that don't understand slang, ice means really big diamond-I mean really, really big.) Now Lil is not a wealthy woman, but she is single and works at the 210 Tavern. Therefore, she invested in this rather large ring for two reasons. 1. To impress men that she has a rich boyfriend and 2. As a means of self-defense. As Lil puts it, "If the rich boyfriend scam doesn't work, this baby will push a man's teeth out his nostrils." So far the rich boyfriend scam must be keeping the men's hands at home because, although a lot of men here are toothless, I haven't seen anyone that has his teeth coming out his nostrils.

Now that you know about 'Diamond Lil', its time to get back to our story.

Although Lil and Bill had gone there twice and never eaten, Bill, although hungry, was impressed, however, with the novelty of the situation. As Lil explained to Bill, 'half the fun is getting in and actually getting served'. For the unwary, an explanation is in order. If you enter the left door from 6:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m., you have entered the Lunch Wagon Café and are greeted by Art, the cook and his wife Madge the waitress. Waylon Jennings is on the radio in the background and you are seated at a stainless steel table & chair, ala 1960. If you enter the right door between 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., you have entered Artoro's Italian Ristoranti. Artoro the chef and Magdalena your hostess greet you. Italian Opera is piped in through the music system and all the tables are covered in red/white checkered tablecloths with lit candles. All very, very elegant for these parts.

This of course begs the question, "What happens if you enter say the right door between 6:00 a.m. and 2:00 p.m.?" In this case you have a very long wait until you are served at 4:00 p.m. Art's (Artoro's) rules are very strict. The Lunch Wagon does not serve dinner and Artoro's Italian Ristoranti does not serve before 4:00 p.m. Now, if you enter by the left door between the hours of 4:00 p.m. and 10:00 p.m., the wait is even longer of course. However, in this case, at 10:00 p.m. Magdalena will ask you to leave and return at 6:00 a.m. because Artoro's Italian Ristoranti does not serve breakfast or lunch and as of this writing, you are not allowed to spend the night. Now if you have that straight, then you are halfway home, or more correctly, halfway to eating.

I say halfway because, Oh, if it were only as simple as stated above. Being a simple people with a simple way of life, does not mean we have no social standards. So the next part of the equation is a little more difficult. You see, in his quest to serve everyone who lives in or travels to northern Michigan, Art & Artoro have two different dress codes and clientele. Art and The Lunch Wagon do not cater to "those fudge sucking rich folk from down-state" and is therefore frequented by locals in their, shall we say, "colorful" attire and grooming. However, Artoro and Artoro's Italian Ristoranti welcomes those "fine, professional entrepreneurs from the metropolitan areas". Now you may ask, "What happens if you enter the wrong door wearing the right attire or the right (don't get confused, I don't mean "right") door wearing the wrong attire. For example, if you enter the Lunch Wagon Café nattily dressed in designer shorts, golf shirt, Nike walking shoes with black socks, or Angelo's Italian Ristoranti wearing cut-off Carhart's, a dirty tank top

dirty sneakers and no socks, well my friend, then things become rather complicated. In fact, lets not even go there. One could write a book on the possible permutations of all the possible dress & door infractions. (Remember the crowd at the doors that opened this story?) If you can't remember to open the correct door at the correct time ( Notice, I didn't use "right" door because I didn't want to confuse you even more), then you probably shouldn't eat there, much less worry about the proper attire.

You are probably thinking, "Hey Wade, how is the food at Artoro's Italian Ristoranti and the Lunch Wagon?" Well, to be honest, Babe & I don't really know. Every time I have gone, I get to the door, look at my watch and my attire, then I look at the crowd of people behind me. Reminiscent of the "Lady or the Tiger", I look at Babe waiting for a signal, Which Door? Babe just shrugs her shoulders and we go home, letting the next person in line make the decision. So my suggestion would be if you are in a hurry or really hungry, just drop in to the old 210 Tavern. They serve just about anybody, just about anytime. Of course the caveat here is "just about", which completely depends on the mood of Sweet Amy and how she is getting along with Spike or any of her four ex-husbands or whether she got a deer during deer season or a turkey during turkey season, or..... Better yet, maybe you should just eat a big breakfast before coming north. See you here, although probably not at the Lunch Wagon or Artoro's.