

Not on the Menu

How two brothers turned a request for takeout into an aviation institution

By Dave Benoff

Having learned the culinary arts from their father, a Catskill Mountains hotelman, brothers Sal and Rudy Celentano saw opportunity when a restaurant they could afford went on sale in Hackensack, N.J., back in 1975. They took over the place and reopened as a family restaurant with an Italian flair. And since it was Rudy who put up the lion's share, he got to put his name on the sign. The Anderson Street eatery soon began to draw crowds because the brothers went out of their way to satisfy. If it wasn't on the menu, no matter. If a customer wanted it, they'd make it. Some of the clientele drifted in from the hangars, ramps and pilot lounges at Teterboro Airport, just a few miles to the south. The aviation crowd liked the fare and wanted the Celentanos to furnish boxed meals for their aircraft passengers, but the brothers declined, uncomfortable with the concept of remotely served meals.

In the early 1980s, Sal's sons Joe and John graduated from New York University and decided to go into business together. What their father and uncle had regarded as problematic, they saw as opportunity, and "Rudy's Inflight Catering" was born.

Operating on a shoestring budget, the brothers worked out of the back of the restaurant in a tiny office and small food prep area. They couldn't even afford their own phone. Recalled Joe, "When a pilot called in an order, it came into the restaurant and was passed on to us in the back."

In their first year, the brothers were producing meals for approximately 16 aircraft a week. A year and a half later, they were doing 15 to 20 aircraft a day, operated two vehicles and had six employees — three of whom still work for them — and were fast outgrowing their backroom space. Two other facts helped motivate a search for their own digs. First, NetJets wanted to contract with a caterer, but said the brothers would have to grow their services and capabilities substantially if they hoped to win



The original staff at Rudy's Inflight Catering worked out of the back of a restaurant, but would soon be in the forefront of the business aviation catering industry.

the business. Secondly, Uncle Rudy wanted to sell his eponymous eatery and retire.

And thus did Joe and John purchase and renovate a small building on Union Street in Hackensack, just a mile and a half from TEB's control tower. The decision cinched the NetJets contract, and with that the company began to expand rapidly. "We instantly grew to 35 employees, four trucks and were servicing Teterboro, Newark and Morristown," said Joe. One of those employees was their father, Sal.

With the move into their own facility, the brothers considered replacing the name Rudy's, which at that point was essentially meaningless, with something, well, meaningful. "We never wanted to keep the Rudy's name," said Joe, "but because we achieved name recognition at the restaurant, we had to stay with a brand that pilots felt comfortable with."

Very quickly the business outgrew its new 5,000-square-foot location, and the brothers built a 1,600-square-foot addition and added a second floor for storage and cooking. "Looking back to the Union Street facility, I don't how we ever worked out of such a small place," said Joe.

In 1998, John told his brother that he

found a place located on North Street in Teterboro that was perfect for them.

"When I first saw it I told him that he was insane," said Joe. "How do you expect me to fill it?" I asked him." But John convinced his brother that the move made sense, and he soon proved to be right. In fact, within three years they had to put on a 1,000-square-foot addition, bringing the facility to its present-day size of 17,000 square feet. And in addition to that, the brothers operate a second facility across the Hudson River in Elmsford, N.Y., just minutes from Westchester County Airport (HPN). Today, Rudy's Inflight Catering employs 120 people and serves all the New York/New Jersey metropolitan airports. It's a 24/7/365 operation that continues as always to answer every pilot's call with a human, not an answering machine.

The sophistication NetJets wanted in its caterer is apparent in Rudy's daily operation. Early on, the company adopted NASA's Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point (HACCP) program. Developed for the space shuttle astronauts, HACCP is a quality assurance program designed to analyze potential food hazards, identify times when food might



From special brands to dog treats, Rudy's' policy is, "You want it, we'll get it for you."

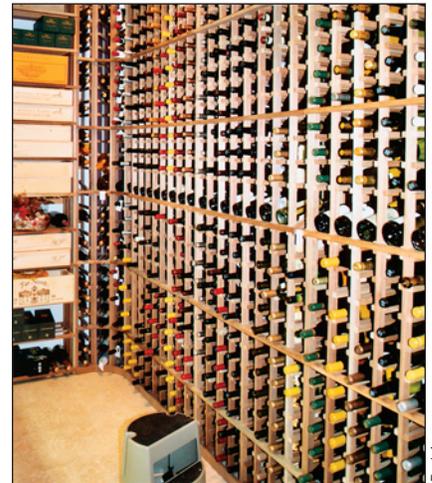
be exposed to contamination, and establish a procedure unique to a specific operation.

"In the United States, HACCP is a completely voluntary program and its implementation is very expensive," said Joe Celentano. "In fact, when we first started the program, I wondered if its value would be worth the aggravation."

Not long after beginning the program in the early 1990s, Rudy's discovered its value. The pilot of a Gulfstream IV called Joe late one afternoon and said that his CEO was in the emergency room with extreme abdominal pain. The executive was on a diet and the pilot said that the only thing he had eaten that day was a chicken salad sandwich from Rudy's.

Joe immediately began an HACCP audit of the chicken salad. He called other flight operations that had also been sent chicken salad, and chicken from that day's batch, but none reported any problems. In researching all records, he discovered at no time was the chicken out of temperature or exposed to contamination. The quick audit suggested the chicken was OK. It wasn't until the next day that the real culprit emerged. It seems that the CEO was being badgered into dieting by his wife, and had his limo driver stop off and pick up two hot dogs for him from a New York street vendor before heading out to the airport. It was the hot dogs, not the chicken, that had been contaminated and gave the executive food poisoning.

After this incident, the brothers were true believers. As a result, today, at the top



A wine cellar that a sommelier would envy

and bottom of the hour, a red light and buzzer go off and work stops as a steady stream of food handlers go to the wash basins to clean their hands. In addition, every time a worker changes to a different type of food, he or she washes their hands again. And every six months, an employee is required to attend recurrent training on biohazards, microbiology and food handling, among other things. At the end of training, the employees are tested and if the person is a supervisor, he or she must correctly answer all questions regarding FDA requirements.

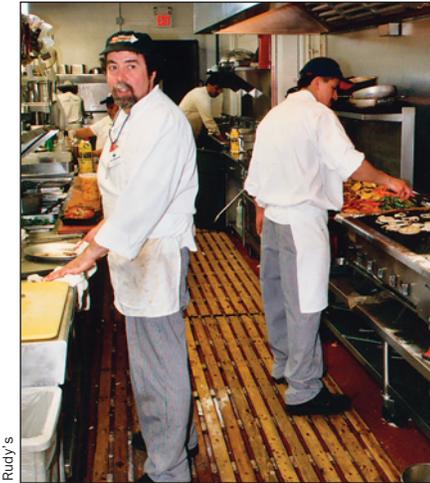
"Now that we have completely adapted HACCP to our facility, we are demanding that all our vendors be HACCP compliant," said Joe Celentano.

Once the food leaves the building, it is placed in Cornish containers inside the truck and then to refrigerators located at the FBOs. "We purchase the refrigerators for the FBOs at a cost of \$3,000 per unit," said Joe. "However, the FBO is responsible for maintaining it and we will validate that the units are up to HACCP levels."

The Food and Drug Administration, which monitors food handling, audits Rudy's at least two times a year. The local FDA representative told *B/CA* that Rudy's was more like a high-end restaurant than a caterer because it custom cooks for each order, whereas the big caterers use an assembly-line process when putting together meals.

"We also handle a lower volume of orders than does the typical caterer," said Joe. Rudy's, on average moves approximately 300 orders per day, whereas an airline caterer might move 30,000 orders in a day.

"Some of our customers ask for unique things," said John Celentano. And following in the tradition of the original Rudy's restaurant, if a customer wants it, Rudy's



Rudy's

The master chef awaits your order. Rudy's has never failed to meet a customer's request.

Inflight will get it. On the orders table during a *B/CA* visit was a wide variety of items, ranging from exotic cheeses to Milk Bones for one exec's dog.

Rudy's has a liquor license and its Teterboro wine cellar rivals those of the great restaurants of New York City. In addition, Rudy's will completely exhaust the equivalent of its entire cellar every three months.

"We have it all," said Joe. "If you want sushi, we have a sushi chef come in. Want kosher food? We have a kosher HACCP kitchen on contract." Rudy's even has a florist who will provide special flower arrangements for your flight.

On one occasion during a gathering at the United Nations, Rudy's found itself providing service for more than 20 foreign governments. "It was interesting having the secret services from different countries observe our operation," said Celentano. "In fact, there were times when we had two countries that didn't get along having to work together in close quarters."

One dignitary on a world tour was so confident in Rudy's service that he took four coffin-size containers of food with him so he wouldn't have to take aboard any provisions from anywhere else. In a tight economy the price of services, including catering, is always under review. But the Celentanos are confident that theirs measures up. "We know price is an issue," Joe acknowledged. "But if service is impeccable, the costs should be justified. Our customers want quality," he added, "and because of my relationship with the vendors, I can get anything I need on a moment's notice."

And that has always been the key to Rudy's service, Joe explained, adding: "If you want it, we'll get it for you." **B/CA**