

March 25, 1991

In a Pizza War, It's 3 Rays Against the Rest

By JOHN TIERNEY

As Ray's pizzerias proliferated during the last two decades, New Yorkers often wondered who Ray was, but no one seemed to know. The results of a New York Times investigation in 1987 were summed up most poignantly by an employee at one Ray's pizzeria who, after first saying that Ray couldn't come to the phone, finally broke down and confessed, "There is no Ray, really."

The situation was existentially disquieting, but also liberating. It meant that Ray's pizzerias could be opened by people of all nations and first names. The only real obstacle was finding a block that didn't already have a Famous Ray's, World Famous Ray's, Original Ray's, Famous Original Ray's, Ray Bari's, Real Ray's or One and Only Famous Ray's.

Recently, though, a shocking scene occurred at some of these pizzerias. A black limousine appeared outside and a short man with a heavy Italian accent emerged with a message: Yes, New York, there is a Ray, and he's finally got himself a lawyer.

The war of the Rays is under way -- lawyers are in the process of filing suits -- and it threatens to engulf dozens of pizzerias in New York, New Jersey, Georgia, Arizona and probably other states. It features three rival Rays who have set aside their historical differences and formed a coalition to trademark the name, eliminate Ray pretenders and deliver Ray's New-York-style pizza around the world.

In keeping with tradition, none of these three men is officially named Ray. But one of them does seem to be the original Ray, and the three are confident of victory over their opponents, who of course are not named Ray either.

It has been a bitter fight, with dueling Rays accusing one another of using cheap cheese and coming from the wrong part of Sicily. But amid the controversy it seems possible, at long last, to construct a history of a New York institution. The story of Ray's is the story of many Rays, among them:

A Ray Named Ralph. Documents gathered during the Rays' legal battle show that there was no Ray's Pizza listed in the 1959 Manhattan telephone book. That was the year Ralph Cuomo, the 22-year-old son of immigrants from southern Italy, opened a pizzeria in Little Italy, using his mother's recipe.

It was at 27 Prince Street, between Mott and Elizabeth Streets, on the first floor of a building that his family lived in and owned. The next year's telephone book listed the name: Ray's Pizza.

Why not Ralph's Pizza?

"Ralph's might have sounded, I don't know, maybe too feminine," Mr. Cuomo explained last week. "Besides, nobody ever called me Ralph. My family took the Italian word for Ralph -- Raffaele -- and shortened it to Rayfie or just Ray. All my life I was addressed that way."

Mr. Cuomo still calls it just Ray's Pizza -- "I never saw any reason to call it Original or Famous or anything" -- and it remains his only pizzeria. In the early 1960's he briefly had another Ray's Pizza at 1073 First Avenue near 59th Street, but he sold that, and in 1964 it ended up in the hands of . . .

A Ray Named Rosolino. The expansionist era began with Rosolino Mangano, an immigrant from Sicily, who used that First Avenue Ray's to found an empire which now includes a dozen Famous Original Ray's pizzerias in Manhattan, each adorned with a coat of arms featuring tomatoes, wheat and a cow.

During an interview at his flagship pizzeria, at 462 Columbus Avenue near 82d Street, Mr. Mangano insisted that he himself was the original Ray. He said Ray was a shortened form of Rosolino, and he produced a receipt made out to him simply as Ray.

"Nobody knows Rosolino," he said. "Everybody knows me as Ray. I can't go no place -- Ray, Ray, Ray. Nobody ever heard of Ralph Cuomo. I was the one who made Ray famous."

Under further questioning, however, Mr. Mangano conceded that he had not been called Ray until he bought a Ray's Pizza. And later, in a gathering of the Rays at Mr. Cuomo's pizzeria in Little Italy, he grudgingly pointed to Mr. Cuomo when asked to name the original Ray. His conciliatory attitude was due to the efforts of . . .

A Ray Named Gary. In 1981 Mr. Mangano sold a Ray's pizzeria at Second Avenue and 51st Street to Gary Esposito, who grew up in Floral Park, Queens. Mr. Esposito opened five more Original Ray's pizzerias on Long Island and in New Jersey, but he showed one remarkable

bit of restraint.

"I have never said that I am Ray," he declared last week. "That's my claim to originality."

After opening his second Original Ray's, Mr. Esposito got curious. "Who was Ray? The mystery, the mystique was so built up that nobody knew anymore," he said. He investigated, found Mr. Cuomo in Little Italy, bought the right to the name and set up a joint company with him to franchise Ray's.

But when they tried to get a Federal trademark for the name, they ran into opposition from Mr. Mangano, and the legal fight dragged on for five years, until Mr. Mangano agreed to join their company last year. This coalition prepared a common logo and recipe to be licensed to Famous Original Ray's Pizza shops, and Mr. Mangano himself went around in a limousine several months ago to warn unlicensed Rays.

"I went to a dozen places in New York and New Jersey," Mr. Mangano recalled. "I said to them, 'You want to be Ray's Pizza, you got to pay. You got to use the same sign, put up the same tile inside, use the same ingredients. You don't want to pay, take down the sign.'"

It is unclear how many other Rays are out there -- they have been spotted at least as far away as Teheran -- or how many will choose to fight the lawsuits the Rays coalition expects to file in Federal Court in Manhattan by the end of this week. At least one remains unbowed:

A Ray Named Joseph. He does not claim to be named Ray, but Joseph Bari insists he *is* Ray. In 1973 he bought a Ray's Pizza formerly owned by Mr. Mangano at Third Avenue and 76th Street, and he went on to open five other pizzerias in Manhattan and on Long Island. He named them Ray Bari Pizza.

Who is Ray Bari?

"There is no Ray Bari," said Mr. Bari, an immigrant from Sicily. "There is Joe Bari. There is Carmelo Bari, my brother. Someone else may have been Ray's on a small street in Little Italy before us, but we were the ones who made Ray's popular."

Although Mr. Bari once claimed that he had the sole rights to use any form of the name Ray -- because he had registered it with New York State -- he now says that he is resigned to letting the Rays coalition get a Federal trademark for the Ray's and Famous Ray's and Original Ray's. But he wants to keep the name Ray Bari, and his lawyers are battling the Rays coalition's lawyers on this issue.

Beyond the legal dispute, both sides suspect the other of using inferior mozzarella, and both tell stories of loyal customers getting sick from the other Ray's pizza. Mr. Bari's sister, Anna, could not resist noting that Mr. Mangano's native village in the mountains of Sicily was scorned by the inhabitants of her hometown by the sea. Casting Aspersions

"It's a lower-class place, like the difference between Bensonhurst and Fifth Avenue," she said. She further faulted Mr. Mangano for offering Buffalo chicken wings in his pizzerias, and for on occasion making a pizza topped with ziti.

"He put pasta on pizza -- write that down," she said.

Mr. Mangano proudly acknowledged the allegation, claimed that a member of the Bari clan had once worked for him as a delivery boy and accused the Baris of making a watery sauce. He said the Baris had copied one of his crucial innovations, the display counter featuring a line of pizzas with different toppings.

Mr. Bari scoffed at this claim and cited his own innovations, including the placement of the dough preparation table by the window and the use of paper plates.

In Little Italy, relatives of Mr. Cuomo mentioned some of his innovations -- "I remember the night Ray said, 'Let's try pesto on a pie,' " said his nephew, Anthony Salvatore -- but the man who seems to be the original Ray was not eager to make any claims himself.

He is a shy man who refused to pose for a photograph and referred most questions to his nephew and Mr. Esposito. He said he was letting them deal with the new Ray's franchises and the legal disputes. The reason he had never bothered going after other Rays or selling franchises himself, he said, was that he had been too busy running his own pizzeria.

"You're earning a living, your family's comfortable, so you don't worry," Mr. Cuomo said. "And there weren't so many other Rays at first. But in the last few years they just blossomed. Every other corner there seems to be a Ray's now."

"Their pizza gives us a bad name," he added. "I don't want to knock anyone else, but there's nothing like our Ray's."