



(Clockwise from top left) The Ambassador Restaurant, shown here in the late '70s, features an iconic old-school dining room; founder Joseph "Chinko" Rossi works in the kitchen in the mid-'60s; Chinko mans the bar; The Ambassador faces a waterfront view; David, Chinko, Joseph Jr. and Marian Rossi gather at The Ambassador in 1976.

Has your pizzeria been in business for 50 years or longer? If so, contact us at tracy@pmq.com.

PIZZA
HALL OF
FAME

THE AMBASSADOR RESTAURANT

This tavern-turned-restaurant in Michigan's Upper Peninsula serves up specialty pizzas, oversized fishbowl cocktails and warm hospitality in a one-of-a-kind setting. **BY TRACY MORIN**

On New Year's Day in 1965, Joseph "Chinko" Rossi and wife Marian opened the doors of their new business, The Ambassador Restaurant in Houghton, Michigan. Joseph's experience working in restaurants prompted him to sell food in the building, previously a local tavern, which shared space with Sears, Roebuck and Co. He was the first to sell pizza in the small town, home to Michigan Tech University. "There was nothing like that here, and after a couple of years, Sears moved out, and we expanded into the whole building," explains David Rossi, son of Joseph and current co-owner. "We more than doubled our capacity and tripled the ovens and menu. That's when it really took off."

Rossi partially credits The Ambassador's beautiful building, artwork and atmosphere for its longevity and success. Murals on canvas from the turn of the 20th century were installed from a local brewery after Prohibition, and customers enjoy a waterfront view of Portage Lake from the dining room. But the food has always been the main focus. Joseph rolled the dough himself, with a rolling pin, to craft the thin-crust pizzas, while the pork sausage—ground and spiced in-house—remains a point of pride. "If you watch our clientele throughout the day, we have everyone, from under-21 to people in their 80s and 90s," David says. "We're not fine dining—it's casual for retired people, college kids and locals. We've been in business so long,

we've built a reputation with no promotions or discounts. My dad always said: 'Put your advertisement on the plate.'"

David, then a teen, worked at the business from its opening year, and he and his brother took over when their parents retired in the '80s. Today, he shares ownership with his nephew and a business partner. Though The Ambassador's environment remains charmingly old-school, David updated operations with the introduction of a POS system and notes that moving to electronic gift cards from handwritten versions tripled their sales. He also expanded into specialty pies, like the award-winning Tostada. "It's like a taco on pizza, and it's extremely popular," David explains. "We don't do delivery, because we don't want to get away from what we do best. We focus on quality and fairness of price."

Though the town has grown since The Ambassador's opening, this pizza original in Michigan's Upper Peninsula has stamped itself as a true Houghton landmark—the place ex-college kids head first when they return for a visit, and the go-to gathering place for loyal locals. "Everybody here, at one time or another, has passed through our doors," David says. "Having this business in the same family for more than 50 years, it's been quite a ride." 🍕

Tracy Morin is PMQ's senior copy editor and the editor of PizzaVegan.com.