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A Hamptons Hangout Celebrates Its 20th Birthday

By FLORENCE FABRICANT

FOR the writer Nora Ephron, there is only one restaurant in the Hamptons. "You have to keep going to places you love," she said. "I don't have time to get romantically involved with another restaurant. I'm married to Nick & Toni's."

Ms. Ephron has been eating there since it opened, in 1988. On a Friday evening two weeks ago, she was back, with her husband, the writer Nick Pileggi, Steven Spielberg and Kate Capshaw.

From the beginning, Nick & Toni's in East Hampton has been a magnet for the kinds of people who get nominated for Oscars, paint canvases that hang in museums, commute in helicopters and own office towers.

This Sunday, the restaurant will celebrate its 20th anniversary with a benefit for the Hayground School in Bridgehampton, which the owners helped to found. Isaac Mizrahi, Kelsey Grammer, Jonathan Tisch, Barry Sonnenfeld and Mr. Spielberg are expected to taste food prepared by Tom Colicchio, Eric Ripert and Jonathan Waxman, among others.

Many restaurants attract famous customers at first, but holding on to them for decades is a trick few can muster. The success of Nick & Toni's may have less to do with what the restaurant is than with what it is not.

While it does get its share of ink on the gossip pages, it is not a prism of the trendy Hamptons club scene. It is, for better or worse, a family restaurant.

When the late Jeff Salaway and his wife, Toni Ross, then in their 30's, opened their restaurant, they wanted to recreate the experience of dining in small towns in Tuscany. (The two were artists who met in a marble quarry in Carrara.) In the beginning the restaurant was a kind of high-end mom-and-

pop affair, with Mr. Salaway running the dining room and Ms. Ross making the desserts, skills they had honed working for Mr. Waxman in New York.

Ms. Ross, 51, had always lived in a celebrity-strewn world. Her father, the late Steven J. Ross, was the chairman of Time Warner, and at first he was part of the draw for some customers.

"We knew Steve Ross and started going when it first opened because of him and Toni," said Charles Gwathmey, the architect. "It got to be like family, a homey kind of place."

Not everyone sees it that way. Many locals, and some summer people as well, are kept away by high prices and the idea — real or perceived — that the restaurant is for celebrities and insiders. To endear itself to the community, Nick & Toni's holds a farmers' market and offers an off-season \$30 dinner that includes a movie ticket.

Mr. Salaway, who died seven years ago in a car accident, when he was 46, was a natural host, by all accounts. He could make anyone feel welcome, from a major business figure like Ronald Perelman to a small child kept busy with crayons and paper.

"When Jeff was alive, everyone always thought they had spent part of the evening with Jeff, even when he was not in the restaurant," said Bonnie Munshin, who started working at the restaurant in 1992 and now manages it. Ms. Munshin and Kirsten Benfield fine-tune the reservations. It helps that in summer, tables on the porch greatly expand the capacity, and that someone who is kept waiting at the bar might be able to see Keith Richards, Jack Nicholson or Paul McCartney sitting nearby.

"When people like Nicholson and McCartney are there, Bonnie knows how to protect them," said Alec Baldwin, the

actor, who lives in Amagansett. "Everyone knows not to bother them."

Ms. Munshin has honed a no-nonsense technique for marching her charges to their tables, giving them the option of making eye contact with other customers, or not. "I've seen a lot of famous people come into Nick & Toni's and everyone plays it cool, they don't pay attention," said Steven Gaines, a chronicler of the Hampton scene who wrote "Philistines at the Hedgerow" (Little, Brown, 1998). "The only ones I've seen cause a stir were Magic Johnson and Brad Pitt."

Three years after Nick & Toni's opened, the owners expanded it, adding a bar and a small dining room with a wood-burning oven. That room is dominated by a mosaic on the oven's chimney with the image of a dog, the restaurant's logo. Mr. Salaway asked the artist Eric Fischl, who was a regular, to create the mosaic with the chipped, broken and impractical Italian Deruta pottery dishes the restaurant had used at first.

For a long time afterwards, Mr. Fischl dined at no charge at table 24, considered the best in the house because of its view of the room. "I don't need to sit in front of my mosaic every time I eat there, but that's where they always put me," he said.

Joseph Realmuto, who has been in the kitchen for 15 years and became the chef in 1997, cooks Italian-Mediterranean food with a sure hand. But dealing with the customers isn't always easy. "The celebrities are not the fussy ones," he said. "It's the others, who want to feel like celebrities, who are the fussy ones." Still Mr. Realmuto makes special vegan risottos for Russell Simmons.

Ms. Ross recalled that when things got crazy in the restaurant, she and Mr. Salaway would look at each other and say: "Hey. It's only dinner."



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THE SCENE From left above, Mari Haughey, Bonnie Munshin and Phyllis Bluske check the guest list at Nick & Toni's in East Hampton, N.Y. Barry Sonnenfeld, near right, and Jack Nicholson at a party there in 2002.



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