

Carmela Marie caters on large scale

By Mary Ellen Godin
Record-Journal staff

SOUTHINGTON — John Salerno misses the days when his catering operation fed and served guests in the Mountain Room at the base of Mt.

Yes, We're Open

Southington.

From 1989 to roughly 2002, Salerno's staff and children would dress up the room's rustic interior for weddings, charity events and corporate functions. Salerno was never happier.

The Mountain Room ended the practice of opening the dining hall in the summer months and the catering stopped there. But by then Salerno, owner of Tops Market, and his crew had developed a strong following among corporate clients.

"We established ourselves as quality caterers," Salerno said. "But we needed something that distinguished us from being Tops Market. It's a branding of fine catering, not cold-cut platters and sausages."

For the past few years, Salerno, fellow Tops co-owner Betsy Tooker and his daughter Janalynne Gius discussed a formal separation of the 30-plus-year-old grocery business and the catering business. The name came easily. Carmela Marie was Salerno's mother who died last year, but left a legacy of cooking.

"It fit; Italian grandmothers are known for their cooking," Salerno said.

Salerno, helped by Tooker and Gius, put the idea of branding the catering side of the family business into action two months ago. They are equipping a mobile kitchen,



Johnathon Henninger / Record-Journal

John Salerno and Betsy Tooker separated their catering operation from Tops Market.

complete with stove, refrigerators, warming units, grills, frozen drink machines, etc. to bring to catered sites through Central Connecticut.

Carmela Marie catering has plenty of corporate clients and caters golf tournaments as well as movie nights at the Southington Showcase Cinemas, feeding as many as 400 people at times.

"We have done this for years, but people still don't know about us," Salerno said. "We would like to expand right now."

Salerno has three key people in the catering business: himself, Tooker, and French head chef Patrick Nourie. Two other chefs who graduated from Johnson & Wales and work in the market kitchen are being groomed for the catering busi-

ness. Carmela Marie marketing is being handled by Gius, who helped set up a dedicated Web site and is adding to the company's list of venues.

The business is still run from the Tops Market kitchens, but Salerno's dream is to eventually have another room for entertaining. The first goal is to get the mobile kitchen on the road.

Q: Where are you catering now?

A: We have a variety of venues. We've done a wedding at the Wadsworth Mansion, the New England Carousel Museum in Bristol and Hawk's Landing Country Club in Southington. We're approved at all these places. We're seeking out new venues like the Hill-Stead Museum and Wind-ing Trails Summer Day Camp

in Farmington.

Q: What sets you apart from other caterers?

A: It is so true that it is the personality and the personal touch. We have provided first-class quality weddings to people who would not normally have been able to afford that kind of affair. The mountain room was a little rough around the edges, but we made it classy. They appreciated that they could have a first-class wedding at a fraction of the price. We spend a lot of time with people planning.

Carmela Marie, at 887 Meriden-Waterbury Turnpike, offers full-service catering based on personal needs. There are several menus, but items can be interchanged. For more information, call (860) 628-8794.