



December 16, 2009

Dear Friends,

With the upcoming New Year nearly upon us, it will soon be time to look forward with best wishes for 2010. But since we're just now getting into the full swing of the holiday spirit, and that look forward doesn't start in earnest until the week after Christmas, there's still an opportunity to glance back at the big things that happened in 2009.

At this time one year ago, we were all caught in the middle of a very dark cloud. Rain was pouring down on the economy and nobody could escape the storm. We knew it was going to be a tough year for Café Sam, even though there was never any question about our ability to survive. That's one of the advantages of being a "Mom and Pop" operation – you pay close attention to how the place is running and move quickly to handle unexpected situations.

The first thing we noticed was that even though it was a tough time for everyone financially, our regular customers still wanted to stay in their Café Sam routine. That shows the loyalty of our big family (and it weighs heavily on us). At the same time, however, we knew that even with the support of our regular customers it was going to be more important than ever to stay competitive and deliver value. Change was in order.

In the front of the house, that meant think, think, think, and think some more. Mary found a way to purchase closeout wines at great prices, and she passed them on by turning our piano top into a wine bar with bottles priced between \$16 - \$20. Dan wanted to round out our typically heavy dinner entrée specials with lighter options. Chef DJ sharpened up his kitchen knives and loaded dining room trays with cutting edge, innovative dishes using ingredients that let him put more on the table for less money. And so on, from there, as everyone stepped up to the plate with great ideas (we even broke down and painted the dining rooms in different colors with input from the service staff)!

Behind the scenes, we pushed harder than ever to be productive. That involved things like cleaning, fixing, and strategically adjusting labor schedules. One of our crew members had this to say sometime in February: "I can't wait to get busy again, because there's too much work to do when we're slow." They say that's one benefit of a recession – it's a wake up call to polish up your business practices!

Someone came up with the idea of starting a website. Funny thing about Café Sam – we're really old school. That's right, it's the year 2009 and we still don't have a computer or a fax in the restaurant. For better or for worse, the thinking is that we always want to be hands on and feel our way around (keeping books with a pencil, watching inventories by sight, writing recipes in notebooks, etc.) and for this reason we have rejected technology. Anyhow, we went with the website idea, and designed it so we could keep our hands on that, too!

Which brings us to the website news page. Holy cow – did that turn out to be a hoot! We set the tone right from the first post – with Dan's recipe for an elephant float. From there, we went just about every place we could, never knowing ourselves what was coming next. We shared a lot with you. Bruce Springsteen, Mary and her pedometer, our house prankster stories, the G-20 rioting that took place in front of the building, and some Café Sam 101's as we researched and explored new things around us.

Some of our favorites: our treasured Troy Polamalu football, the Who singing "Tattoo", the Iron City Brewing post, our tequila/mezcal tasting (that's not happening again), Jack Nicholson and Easy Rider, and the "Classic Tutorial" which illustrates the caffeine water recipe. The best of all: hands down the letter written to the Post-Gazette by the Vangelder family from Tucson, Arizona.

But of course, the page is really about the food. After all, that's our signature. There are some mighty fine recipes for you to try.

We emerged from the recession sometime in the late spring, probably better off from it in some ways. It slapped us around a little bit, hitting us with a hard reminder that in our business (probably any business) you need to care about everything, stay focused, move forward, create, invent, and always find time to clean! Of course, we really knew that all along – otherwise we couldn't have hung in there for twenty three years.

After the recession, we (along with the surrounding communities) had to deal with a second downer this year – a real estate blowout with our powerful "neighbor" UPMC. We have come to understand that UPMC is divided into two distinct parts – the medical side and the evil empire (referring to a fiefdom that is ruled by a small group standing in Gucci loafers high above the rest of us in the US Steel Tower). As caregivers, they are truly among the best in the world. But as neighbors in the community, thanks to the mentality of the penthouse administrators, they are the worst.

Last week we joined the East End community groups at a Pittsburgh Planning Commission hearing to question the city's ugly decision permitting UPMC Shadyside to creep onto Baum Blvd. with entrances and parking for a new medical emergency facility. (The hospital gets a lot of dubious help from big brother). We think the access should have been located in the hospital's hemisphere on Centre Avenue. No problem with the Urgent Care itself – just a big issue about a failed neighborhood zoning process that treats UPMC like a sovereign nation sporting its own set of rules.

Our environment is very important to us. We'll have to watch and see where all of this goes in the coming months – as we noted in an earlier post our habitat is being chewed up by one very scary gorilla.

That pretty much concludes our "year in review." As noted at the start of this letter to you, we wanted to take a last opportunity to look back, before we look forward. And we're going to look forward with thoughts of you, our wonderful, wonderful friends. Here's what we said in a post back in July: "And a note to all our regulars. In this harsh economic environment (it's been a tough time for everyone), it's you that have kept us on course with wind at our back. We appreciate the loyalty and the business – it doesn't go unnoticed."

It doesn't go unnoticed. We made it, and we hope you're making it, too. See you on the other side.

Peace and good will.

Your pals at Café Sam