

## Gilmanton cafe brings critical small town business into a new day

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**Bob and Becky Ronstadt recently took over the ownership of the store at Gilmanton Corners, now known as “Gilmanton Café.” They are undertaking a thorough examination of every item and process in an effort to improve the business. They are joined in the effort by, in the back, chefs Kate Baumann and Jennifer Bennett, and manager Krista Nielsen. (Adam Drapcho/Laconia Daily Sun)**

By ADAM DRAPCHO, LACONIA DAILY SUN

GILMANTON — Fortuitous developments can sometimes come about by happenstance, and that’s how Bob and Becky Ronstadt came to be owners of the store at Gilmanton Corners, which they have re-named “Gilmanton Café.”

They can pinpoint the moment last year that put them on the path to taking over the store. It was just before Christmas and the snow was flying. Becky looked out of the window and saw Henry Vigeant, who had owned the store for a little more than a year, walking up the road and staring at his cell phone, hoping to find a pocket where he could get a signal. She invited him so that he could use their phone, and he told them that he was looking to sell the business, which was then a pizza shop known as “Gilmanton Slice.” “This restaurant came up for sale, for us, unexpectedly,” Becky said. The property, which was once a gas station and convenience store, serviced basic needs for Gilmanton residents since 1940, when it was built by Harmon and Roxey Stockwell.

Over the decades, as several owners came and went, the business slowly declined, then went dark for a year and a half before being resurrected – at great effort – as a pizza parlor. But then things changed in

Vigeant's personal life, and he wanted to divest of the business.

The Ronstadts live in a nearby property, and in their 16 years in town, they came to understand the significance of the small shop, as not only a place to get a few basic necessities – milk, eggs – but also a place to catch up with friends over a cup of coffee.

"If it were to go away, it would really put a vacuum in the community," said Becky. So, very shortly thereafter that snowy night, they found themselves the owners of the business.

The Ronstadts bring a diverse set of skills and experience to the project. Bob, who has a doctorate from Harvard University in International Business and the Management of Technology, had a career in business and academia, including a position as vice principal at Boston University. Becky's career included work as a software designer, artist and as publisher of Journal of the Print World, dedicated to antique and contemporary fine art on paper.

Both of the Ronstadts also have culinary experience. They both worked at a restaurant that Bob's father operated in Louisiana, and Becky ran a bed and breakfast.

"We saw great opportunity here," said Becky.

Thanks to all of the work that Henry and Rachel Vigeant put in to the building, the Ronstadts were able to spend the past few months focusing on the food.

They don't look at it as just a pizza place. They have subs and sandwiches, salads with lots of fresh vegetables, and chicken tenders that are made from fresh chicken, then hand-battered and fried to order. They've also found ways to accommodate requests for gluten-free or diabetic-friendly menu items. Gilmanton Café also now serves breakfast, whether diners want to sit down and have pancakes and eggs or if they want to grab a breakfast sandwich to eat on their way to work.

But before they looked at any of those, first came the pizza.

"Pizza is the hub," said Becky.

They broke down their pizza product and considered each of their ingredients and every step in the process. What resulted is a heartier slice, with thicker sauce and more cheese, "a beefier pizza," said manager Krista Nielsen. Customers have noticed. "Pizzas have really spiked," she said.

The cooler has a few basic convenience items, which share space with some indulgences, such as cannolis, or chef Jennifer Bennett's bread pudding. On holidays, they are offering special dinners – corned beef for St. Patrick's Day, ham dinner for Easter – or you can treat yourself every day with chili cheese fries.

In any case, diners can be assured that the food has been deemed worthy of certain standards.

"We believe in R and D [research and development], which is proving disastrous for our waistline," said Bob.

Perhaps to help work off those calories, the Ronstadts have a second major development in mind for Gilmanton Corners.

"We've got another project going in just across the street," said Bob. They are still working through the licensing and permitting processes, so they don't want to discuss specifics, but he said the other project would be a "pub-style restaurant."

### **A small store with a big role**

Bill Mahoney, who has lived in town for two decades, said there's a sense of familiarity at Gilmanton Café.

"When you come in here, the girls are very friendly," he said.

It might be a small store, but it's at the heart of a small town, and it offers services that Gilmanton residents would otherwise have to travel many miles to find.

"I think it's of vital importance," Mahoney said. For people who live in town, he said, the business was relied upon as a place to get a cup of coffee and a bite to eat, or as a place to stop on the way home from work if they didn't feel like cooking for their family. "It's been here for so long, that when it was shut down, it was like, 'Now what are we going to do?'"