

Arthur Cutler, 53, Restaurateur of Eclectic Taste and Unlikely Sites

By Eric Asimov

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Arthur J. Cutler, whose small empire of popular, conceptually unusual restaurants made a distinctive mark on the New York dining business, died on Wednesday at his home in Great Neck, N.Y. He was 53.

He had a heart attack while sleeping, said his wife, Alice Cutler.

Mr. Cutler ranged far and wide in the kinds of restaurants he conceived, in the places he built them, and in the partners he chose.

In 1990, he opened Carmine's, an old-fashioned, family-style Italian restaurant, on Broadway near 91st Street, at a time when nobody wanted to open above 86th Street. Carmine's served huge platters of spaghetti and meatballs, rivers of marinara sauce and mountains of garlic at a time when the trend in Italian restaurants was toward elevating the image of the cuisine with extra-virgin oils, aged vinegars and cheese made from buffalo milk.

He opened Ollie's Noodle Shop and Grille, a Chinatown-style restaurant featuring noodles and roast meats, when other uptown Chinese restaurants were still mired in a Sichuan bog. He backed Gabriela's, an authentic Mexican restaurant on Amsterdam Avenue and 93d Street, when other Mexican restaurants on the Upper West Side still specialized in margaritas and chips.

And, in perhaps his greatest display of foresight, he opened branches of Ollie's and Carmine's, and another restaurant, Virgil's Real BBQ, near Times Square just before the redevelopment of Times Square took off. In all, he was a partner or investor in more than a dozen restaurants and food shops, including two Docks Oyster Bar and Seafood Grills.

Mr. Cutler did not court critical acclaim with his restaurants. He favored hearty easy-to-enjoy dishes. Despite his success, he shunned attention. He was courteous to reporters, but discouraged questions about his business.

Drew Nieporent, whose properties include Montrachet, Nobu and TriBeCa Grill, said, "He was kind of like a quiet genius in our business."

While Mr. Cutler loved food, his true expertise lay both in devising appealing concepts for restaurants and in selecting sites that might appear improbable.

"Artie was a real-estate visionary," said Michael Ronis, who was a partner with Mr. Cutler in Carmine's, Virgil's and Polistina's, a pizzeria and wine bar that is to open soon on Broadway near 82d Street. He recalled visiting Times Square with Mr. Cutler one blustery Saturday night in 1990.

"Nobody was on the street, the wind was blowing and the theaters were closed," Mr. Ronis said. "But Artie said, 'This is going to come back.' We might argue about food, but when it came to real estate, we said, 'We're just riding your coattails.' "

Mr. Cutler saw fertile ground for restaurants on the Upper West Side, which its residents have long bemoaned as a restaurant wasteland. "I don't understand why there are not more restaurants opening here," he said in an interview in 1990, shortly after opening Carmine's. "This is one of the most densely populated residential areas in the country, with 189,000 people per square mile. Why can't others focus on that?"

Mr. Cutler seemed to have a knack for developing appealing concepts, and was willing to act as a pioneer. Tsu Yue Wang, Mr. Cutler's partner in the four Ollie's restaurants as well as in Virgil's and Carmine's, said only Mr. Cutler was willing to join him. "People in Chinatown were afraid to come uptown," Mr. Wang said. "Artie said, 'Why not? I like it and other people will, too.'"

Before opening Virgil's, he and his three partners toured the barbecue regions of the South in a van. "We'd be driving, two Italians, a Jew and a Chinese guy," Mr. Ronis recalled. "We'd pull into these huts, and a guy would come to the door, look at us and say, 'Are you from the I.R.S.?' "

Perhaps none of his partners was as unusual as Gabriela Hernandez, whom he backed in Gabriela's. She was the Cutlers' housekeeper.

"She and her uncle would come to the house and make these wonderful meals," Mrs. Cutler said. "He said, 'Wouldn't it be great to have a real Mexican restaurant, not one of those Tex-Mex places?' And he opened it in an area he identified as an up-and-coming Mexican neighborhood."

Arthur Cutler was born in Brooklyn and grew up in New Hyde Park, N.Y. The food business came naturally: his father had a grocery store and a diner, and his grandfather had a herring stand in Brooklyn.

"He comes from a long line of appetizers," said Mrs. Cutler, whom young Arthur met in his junior high algebra class. They were married 32 years, and in addition to his wife, Mr. Cutler leaves two daughters, Jody, 29, of Rockville, Md., and Danielle, 25, of Coconut Creek, Fla.

Mr. Cutler graduated from Columbia University in 1965. After trying his hand at business and social work, Mr. Cutler was working in an appetizing store in Brighton Beach in 1974 when he heard that Murray's Sturgeon Shop on the Upper West Side was for sale. "He borrowed the money from my mother, and that's how he got started," Mrs. Cutler said.

While Mr. Cutler's successes were many, he was not infallible. He was a partner in Stryker's Boxing and Sporting Club, which failed near Times Square in 1995. "He picked some bad locations," Mrs. Cutler said. "He had many losses. But Artie was a gambler. He was prepared to take the losses, and he had a lot more winners than losers."

It was a signature of Mr. Cutler to name his restaurant after a seemingly fictitious personality but, Mrs. Cutler said, the names were not made up. Carmine's was in fact named after Carmine Abbatiello, the harness driver, she said. Ollie's was taken from how some Chinese acquaintances pronounced his name, Artie. And Virgil was the starter at his golf club.

"He figured he'd always get a good starting time," Mrs. Cutler said.

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