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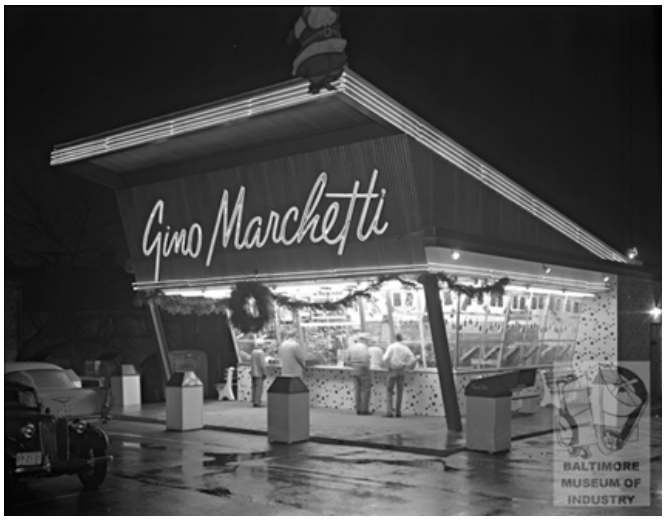
Everybody Goes to Ginos

Burgers, fries, shakes and a big helping of nostalgia are on the menu at the newly resurrected version of the beloved hometown joint.

By Mary K. Zajac

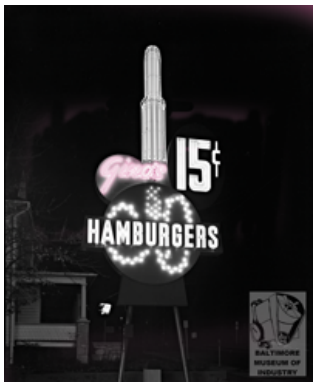


"Do you want to see something neat?" the man in line in front of me asks unprompted. We are at and Chicken, the resurrected namesake of former Baltimore Colt Gino Marchetti that opened in Towson folks are reliving their Gino's memories via towering chocolate shakes served in tall soda fountain glass bearing Gino Giants.

One video screen shows Soupy Sales hamming it up as Paul Revere (and his mother) in an old Gino's commercial; another screen shows stills of old Colts, promotions, restaurant photos.

"Sure," I tell the man, who later introduces himself as Jim Vogtman of Perry Hall.

He pulls a cellophane sleeve out of a manila envelope. "Look," he says, as he shows me an autographed photo of Marchetti, which he turns over to reveal a small sketch of a Gino's restaurant with the original 1950s menu, the prices printed out in neat navy ink. Hamburgers cost 15 cents, earning them the nickname Fifteen-O's, as I later find out. French fries cost 10 cents, the same as a Coke or a coffee— but less than a 20-cent milkshake.



The rendering of Gino's looks nothing like the Gino's we're in now, a brown brick building that resembles all the other brown brick buildings in this maze of a Towson business park. Instead, the original Gino's captured the spirit of mid-century modern, roof cocked at a sharp angle and Gino Marchetti's full name in jaunty script above the glass front. A neon rocket takes off from a parking lot sign that reads "Gino's 15-cent hamburgers."

Neither design reminds me much of the Gino's of my childhood, which sat at the corner of Perring Parkway and Joppa Road. (This turns out to be Vogtman's "local," too.) Instead, I conjure up red plastic seats, a peaked roof and a birthday party with balloons for a childhood friend I can no longer remember.

Vogtman's reminiscences hit harder, surprising us both. Gino's had good, cheap food, Vogtman explains, but his reasons for coming to the new restaurant go much deeper than that. Eating at the new Gino's recalls a bygone era, and the particular people

that defined that era for him. “It’s [about] everything. It’s the Colts. It’s Gino Marchetti. It’s my father-in-law [Larry Hoerl],” says Vogtman, his voice thick with emotion as he reminisces about the Colts’ games he and Hoerl shared at Memorial Stadium.

All this from a hamburger joint?

You betcha.

For those of us who ate our first fast food in the 1970s, Gino’s was the hometown choice in a burgeoning landscape of burger options. But for folks who came of age with the late 1950s Colts and the new era of the 1960s, Gino’s was community in the broadest sense. It wasn’t just a place to get burgers. It was a place to meet your favorite hometown heroes, to hang out and meet a friend or show off a hot rod, a place to come of age.

Even when the first Gino’s opened in 1959 on North Point Road, the restaurant was more than just a drive-in. Gino Marchetti was already a hometown hero who’d played six seasons with the Colts (including “The Greatest Game Ever Played” at Yankee Stadium in late 1958) when he founded the restaurant. His fellow founders were teammates Alan Ameche, who’d already had success with his eponymous burger drive-in, and Joe Campanella; and friend Louis C. Fischer— with backing from Colts owner Carroll Rosenbloom. Players’ salaries were modest at that time— Marchetti made $11,000 a year — and it wasn’t unusual for athletes to work in the off-season. Marchetti worked in factories and in construction, and even tended bar, a skill he picked up from working in his father’s bar in Antioch, Calif. Still it seems utterly unimaginable today that during the restaurant’s opening months, Marchetti actually worked in the kitchen, grilling burgers, mopping up at the end of a shift and, of course, signing autographs. His co-workers made 85 cents an hour.

“I fell in love with it,” Marchetti, 85, tells me over the phone from the King of Prussia Gino’s, where he still works several days a week, cooking chicken and onion rings. “I loved the people. Like football, when you get a good team, you hate to leave the team.”

In the first few weeks of its opening, the North Point Gino’s made $9,000 weekly, a stunning amount when you consider that most receipts came to around 80 cents. “People were coming from all over,” explains Marchetti, “because basically at that time, nobody ever heard of a 15-cent burger.”

Other Gino’s locations followed quickly: at 5900 Pulaski Highway, the corner of North Avenue and St. Paul Street, and at 619 York Road where, in an October 1959 ad in The Sun, Marchetti invited the public to a grand opening featuring a meet-and-greet with Colts players Bill Pellington, Bert Rechichar, Don Joyce and Jim Mutscheller.

By February 1960, what was then Gino-Ameche Foods Inc. went public, offering 99,875 shares of Class A common stock in order to finance an additional dozen drive-ins in the Baltimore area, some under Ameche’s name, others under Gino’s. Despite the passing of a bill in the early ’60s allowing the city to regulate the growth of drive-ins, Gino’s flourished, expanding into Pennsylvania, New Jersey and later, Delaware. (“While this city is engaged in a life and death struggle to preserve its residential areas, a little handful of manipulators have decided that they will shower this city with a deluge of glorified hamburger joints,” The Sun reports one of the bill’s sponsors, then-Councilman Peter Angelos, D-3rd, said in July 1961.) Eventually, all Ameche’s became Gino’s, including the original Ameche’s on Reisterstown Road; the Loch Raven and Taylor Avenue Ameche’s became the corporation’s headquarters. In the ensuing years, more than 500 Gino’s would spring up along the northeast corridor of the country.

Local Gino’s served its burgers on bread made from Baltimore’s H&S Bakery, until H&S struck a deal with a newcomer to the local hamburger scene, McDonald’s, in the mid-’60s. But Gino’s proved an able competitor. In 1965, Marchetti and his team were introduced to Col. Harland Sanders and Kentucky Fried Chicken through a mutual friend and business associate, Jim Matthews, who was using the Colonel’s famous recipe in his Tops restaurant in Washington, D.C. “We went over there and liked the product,” recalls Marchetti. “We met the Colonel, who was absolutely a wonderful person, one of the greatest guys I’ve ever met.” Gino’s bought the recipe rights for Maryland, Northern Virginia, New Jersey and Pennsylvania— making Gino’s the only place in the region to buy the chicken.

Gino’s signature “Giant”— two burgers, three pieces of bread, lettuce, tomato, onion and that special sauce— followed in 1966. Charlie, a former employee at the Gardenville Gino’s on Belair Road in 1968 and prefers to not have his last name mentioned, remembers working the burger grill in that era’s Gino’s uniform— black pants, white shirt, black bow tie and a white paper hat. (Later years saw burgundy uniforms, including thigh-skimming mini-dresses for the women.) He’d wield a wide spatula, large enough to turn six burgers at a time, the equivalent of three Giants. Each burger received three squirts of ketchup, two of mustard and one of special sauce from a device that looked like a caulking gun.

French fries required more effort, Charlie recalls. Gino’s made its fries in-house, and employees would put whole potatoes and a little water into a large drum with a rough interior. You’d turn it on, Charlie recalls,

“and the potatoes would ricochet off the sides” scraping off the peels. There was a machine for cutting the whole potatoes into fries, and a deep vessel to soak the cut potatoes in salted water before they were fried to almost done. You’d drain the fries at that point, Charlie explains, and when someone placed an order, you’d fry them again so they would be fresh and crisp.

“You could eat anything you wanted as long as you wrote it down,” he recalls. “And if there was anything left over at the end of the night, you could take it home.”

The company quickly earned a reputation for generosity to both its staff and the community. A 1968 Sun classified ad outlines the benefits of working part time for Gino’s, including a starting salary of $1.25 per hour, free meals, paid vacation and a Christmas bonus. “[At Thanksgiving], we’d invite the employees to meet the players after [the Colts’] practice, and we’d have a big basket, a big turkey, a bottle of wine. You didn’t have to buy a thing for your dinner,” explains Marchetti. “Everyone got to have a basket. When we got to 10,000 employees,” he says, pausing, “well, that’s a lot of turkeys.”

Gino’s was also generous with sponsorship. “We saw ourselves as local businessmen operating in the city of Baltimore,” says Marchetti, who used his good fortune to help with myriad local causes. The company hosted Gino’s basketball tournaments for local high schools, funded children’s clubs, often anonymously, and even sponsored a 1981 summer film festival in Hopkins Plaza. In Philadelphia, Michael Nutter, the city’s current mayor, was the first beneficiary of a Gino’s scholarship.

By 1971, Ameche had resigned from the day-to-day duties of Gino’s, though he remained on the board of directors. And while Gino’s fortunes fluctuated in the recession years of the ’70s, a whole new generation discovered the pleasure of a burger, fries and a Coke, even if they didn’t necessarily remember the retired Colt player for whom the restaurant was named.

To childhood friends Laurie High and Carrie McFadden (a frequent Style contributor), a trip to the Gino’s in Towson was part of a Saturday ritual that made the pre-teens feel grown up. They would walk to Gino’s, order a burger, fries and small Coke, sitting in the same seats at the same table, left of the counter and the colorful paintings of pro athletes rendered on the wall behind it. The meal cost around 63 cents, McFadden recalls, with just enough change to buy a quarter pound of malted milk balls at Hutzler’s before heading down to Towson Plaza to shop.

To Kathy Patterson, the author of the blog, MinxEats, Gino’s Kentucky Fried Chicken was the reward for enduring the walk through the industrial area on Edison Highway between Catholic High School and the Gino’s before catching the No. 22 bus back to Highlandtown. On Saturdays, Patterson and her mother would often make a special trip to the Gino’s on Baltimore Street between a day’s shopping on Howard Street. McDonald’s was closer, Patterson explains, but “Gino’s was the hometown favorite,” she says. “It was Baltimore.”

In 1982, Gino’s was acquired by the Marriott Corp., which quickly changed many of the Gino’s restaurants into Roy Rogers or Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets. By 1991, the last remaining Gino’s, in Pasadena, Md., closed its doors for good. Until now.

The new restaurants in King of Prussia, Pa., and in Towson have rekindled a taste for Giants and secret sauce, prompting both pilgrimages to Gino’s and the stories that accompany them. Everyone wants to share their story, says Marchetti. “People remember Gino’s as something special,” he says. “We got to be a part of their community, and it really makes me feel very, very, very good.”

Food for Fans

Sure, very few of Baltimore’s athlete-owned restaurants received rave reviews despite the often huge portions of steaks and seafood they served. But food wasn’t really the point. Decorated with sports memorabilia, these restaurants became shrines to sports teams and star players, places where you could eat like a football player and possibly see one, too (Johnny Unitas and Bill Pellington routinely showed up at their restaurants). Here are a handful Baltimoreans remember fondly.

The Iron Horse
York Ridge Shopping Center
Owner: Bill Pellington, Baltimore Colt
Circa 1963 to circa 1984
Everything was large at Bill Pellington’s Iron Horse: the heavy, carved, high-backed chairs, the drinks, the portions of crab imperial, French onion soup (pronounced salty by both Sun food critics John Dorsey and Elizabeth Large on separate visits years apart) and steaks. The one exception was the “lady petite fillet mignon,” which was “just perfect for the gal at your table,” the menu advised. With a Saturday night supper club feel to it, the restaurant was kept so dark that upon entering it would take a moment for your eyes to adjust. A 1977 Sun review found “well-groomed” people taking to the dance floor to “vintage supper club songs” played on an electric organ.

Rustler Steakhouses
Chain restaurants

Owner: Joe Campanella, Baltimore Colt
Dates: Circa 1971 to 1982
From its corny commercials featuring covered wagons, homesteaders and dusty cowboys with “big steak appetites” but not “big steak money,“ to its cattle brand logo, Rustler may be remembered more for its Western shtick than for any actual food. But serve food it did, offering “serve yourself salad” and steak dinners complete with baked potato and a toasted roll for family-friendly prices. A division of Gino’s, the two were often built in tandem. Where there was a Gino’s, there usually was a Rustler.

The Flaming Pit
Shopping center at York and Padonia roads
Owner: Ordell Braase, Baltimore Colt
Dates: Circa 1969 to 1980
Ordell Braase brought family-style dining to Cockeysville with his Flaming Pit restaurant. A large, noisy space with brick and stucco walls and beamed ceilings, the centerpiece was, of course, the charcoal (later gas) fueled flaming pit where staff would grill all cuts of meat. The restaurant was also known for its soup and salad bar, the warmers for the individual pots of coffee brought to tables after an evening meal and the treasure chest that held a small treat for each visiting child.

Brooks Robinson’s Gorsuch House
511 Gorsuch Avenue, off of Greenmount between 32nd and 33rd streets
Owner: Brooks Robinson, Baltimore Oriole
Dates: Robinson was a part-owner from around 1964 to 1977
Waverly’s Gorsuch House originally shared a name with another Oriole (and Robinson) before Brooks Robinson entered into partial ownership with former Orioles coach Eddie Robinson in the early 1960s. But despite the Orioles’ photographs and baseball bats that decorated the dining rooms and the “Robby’s crabcakes” on the menu, Robinson’s involvement tended to be hands-off. The menu was classic Maryland, featuring crab imperial, fried chicken, corn fritters, and, according to an Elizabeth Large review from 1974, “terrible stewed tomatoes.

Johnny Unitas’ Golden Arm
6354 York Road
Owner: Johnny Unitas, Baltimore Colt
Dates: Unitas owned the restaurant from the late 1960s to the early 1990s
With the exception of Gino Marchetti, perhaps no Colt spent more time in his eponymous restaurant than Johnny U. Unitas would work the dining room with a stack of photos and a pen, greeting guests and signing autographs. With its dark wood, stained glass and chandelier, the dining room was slightly more formal than other players’ restaurants, and the menu followed accordingly, featuring lobster tails, stuffed shrimp, escargot and the house specialty, fried eggplant.

Sportsman’s Lounge
4723 Gwynn Oak Ave.
Owner: Lenny Moore, Baltimore Colt
Dates: Circa 1965 to 1973
A bar with a limited menu, rather than a full-scale restaurant, Lenny Moore’s Sportsman’s Lounge was an important gathering place for sports and music fans alike. The bar ran buses for Colts games, installed televisions for away games, and hosted chess, backgammon and pinochle tournaments. But it was best known as a spot for live jazz where national performers like Dexter Gordon or beloved local artists like Damita Jo and Ruby Glover performed to predominantly black middle-class audiences.

Andy Nelson’s Barbecue
11011 York Road
Owner: Andy Nelson, Baltimore Colt
Dates: 1981 to present
Andy Nelson’s Barbecue began as a seasonal stand at neighboring Valley View Farms in 1981 before moving to its current location around 2001. The permanent buildings (there are several of them now), wood-paneled and homey, allow patrons to enjoy Nelson’s first-rate barbecue year-round. And the York Road landscape wouldn’t be the same without the giant pink pig on Nelson’s roof.

Boog’s Barbecue
Oriole Park at Camden Yards and Ocean City, Md.
Owner: Boog Powell, Baltimore Oriole
Dates: 1992 to present
When Oriole Park at Camden Yards opened in 1992, so did Boog’s Barbecue. From the beginning, fans stood in line for pit beef, turkey and pork, plus the chance for contact with the big man himself, as Powell tried to make an appearance at every home

game. Nearly 20 years later, you can still find him at the green tent near the Eutaw Street entrance. He's the one with hands as big as a bear's paws and a grin that's just as giant (and genuine).

Full Moon Bar-B-Que
2400 Boston St., The Can Company
Owner: Ray Lewis, Baltimore Raven
Dates: 2005 to 2009
After steakhouses, barbecue joints became the restaurants of choice for Baltimore athletes. Ray Lewis' Full Moon Bar-B-Que didn't have the longevity (or the chops) of Andy Nelson's or Boog's, but for four years, the cavernous space in Canton's Can Company drew customers eager to see Lewis and try his brand of ribs, pulled pork and chicken.

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