Joe’s Pizza: an MIT tradition gets new wheels

By Robert E. Malchman

Tradition continued unabowed, indeed enhanced, by progress this fall as Joe and Mike’s Pizza Oven traded in its truck for a spacious new camper with a new oven, stove, chairs and tables. No longer will tall reporters and customers be forced to stoop or bend in the restrictive confines of the old truck.

Joe (“Do you have to use my last name, everybody knows me as ‘Joe’?”) O’Keefe has been an MIT institution since 1959, three years before his son Mike was born. The old truck was probably older than a few current freshmen. “I got it in 1964,” Joe said. “Before that I had a smaller truck.”

Joe was vague about the camper’s cost, but conceded it was certainly “a lot of money.” The greater space and new equipment has enabled Joe and Mike to expand their menu to include such home-style delicacies as corned beef and tuna fish sandwiches.

Despite Reaganomics and the recession, Joe’s time-honored credit policy remains unchanged. “No one goes to bed hungry,” he said. “I'm broke tonight, and we'll take care of you.”

Friends of the Pizza Oven will also be happy to learn that Joe resolved last year’s $5500 sales tax problem. Joe is hesitant to discuss it, though, as it remains “an unpleasant subject.”

Mike is Joe’s youngest son, and in Mike’s own words, he “grew up on the truck.” Mike has been working full time with his father since he graduated from high school.

“When I was little I'd help Joe on the truck,” Mike said. “All the other kids thought it must be pretty full day right there.”

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Over the years Joe has compiled a number of stories about MIT students. “One night we were working on Mass. Ave. until 4am doing a sit-in,” Joe related. “One of the leaders came by and asked that when I saw the Federal officers coming, I should blow my horn real loud. I said, ‘You’re crazy!’ — I didn’t want to get in trouble with the police. But the guy kept arguing, and I finally agreed to turn off all the lights in the truck when they came. As it turned out, I had already left when they did.”

All in all, though, today’s customers are pretty much the same as those of twenty-three years ago, according to Joe. “When I’m here, late at night, they’re all the same — hungry.”

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