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MILAN, N.M. — The best pan-fried trout and mixed berry pie in all of Cibola County are now history thanks to COVID-19.

The Wow Diner in Milan officially shut its doors on June 14, ending a 14-year run for the restaurant.

“COVID-19 hurt us, when we had to start doing takeout. And then, just keeping employees. A lot of them did not want to come back to work, and a lot of them did not show up,” owner Stephanie Rivard said. “It was really hard to try and stay open.”

The retro-style diner temporarily closed on March 18 after Gov. Michelle Lujan-Grisham announced dine-in services for restaurants were suspended, but reopened April 7 for carry-out orders.

Early in June, Rivard said she knew Wow would not be open much longer.

Pre COVID-19, the diner employed 32 workers. During the pandemic, six workers kept the operation going.

“We had to close a few days [after reopening] because we didn’t have any employees, and I didn’t want to do business that way,” Rivard said.

From the diner’s opening in May 2006, Rivard estimates 125 people worked at the restaurant over the years.

Rivard said she will miss the customers, employees, and her favorite pan-fried trout entree from the restaurant’s menu.

“We’ve formed so many great friendships and so many nice relationships, employee relationships, plus our business relationships,” she said.

As for starting another restaurant in the future, “Things change, but as of right now, I do not anticipate that happening,” she said.

Rivard, who is no stranger to working 11-hour days, credited the-late Bill Sorenson, her business partner, as being her most important mentor.

Rivard said remodeling some houses she has to sell will be keeping her busy.

One of her former employees, JoAnn Gallegos, worked as a waitress during the entire time the diner was open. Prior to Wow, Gallegos worked for Rivard at another restaurant she owned in Grants, dating back to 1988.

“I loved it. Stephanie and Bill were the best people to work for. She was more like a mother than a boss to us,” Gallegos said.

“The job got me out of my comfort zone; I got to meet people from all over the world. It was like a home, we always made people feel like they were coming to their home,” she said.

Gallegos said she felt like the restaurant’s shut down was going to happen, but in a way, she said she felt relief too, for Rivard, because she knew she was working so much.

“It was a big shock losing my job. I wasn’t really prepared to think about doing something else, but keeping all options open,” Gallegos said. “It was my home away from home. I was there all the time, I loved working for Stephanie.”

Gallegos will miss the customers, along with the lobster pasta, 16-oz ribs, fish tacos, and pan-fried trout from the diner.

Gallegos is keeping her options open and looking for work in cashiering, or she says she may go back to school.

Gallegos praised Rivard for being there for her beyond the duties at the diner.

“She’s my guardian angel. She saved my life by sending me to rehab, and thankfully, I am going to have five years sober,” Gallegos said. “ ... I love her with all my heart. Bill is also my guardian angel.”

Another former employee of the diner, Jason Trujillo, worked 10 years for Rivard.

“I have to say, it was completely understandable yet it was a mix of shock, sadness, and concern for our regular daily clientele,” Trujillo said of finding out about the restaurant closing.

Trujillo called the diner a place where family and friends could meet up.

“Everyone knew that even the pickiest eaters could enjoy a delicious meal customized to their liking, at reasonable prices,” Trujillo said.

“What made the dining experience so special was the fact that Stephanie would make it a point to personally greet and interact with every guest. She personified the art of customer service and quality dining,” he added.

Trujillo said he stayed on at the diner for as long as he did because he enjoyed the customers.

Trujillo only had praise for the work of his former boss.

“Steph has humbly helped this community in more ways than we can even imagine. I have only ever seen her give sincerely and wholeheartedly, sometimes sacrificing sleep, or sitting and enjoying a longer lunch with her family and friends, she would smile in hope that she was able to help,” Trujillo said.

Currently, the restaurant sits vacant. However, there are plans in store for the diner.

“The new owner, Andy from Spicy Bite, (another Milan restaurant), has purchased the diner, and plans to reopen within a week or so,” according to the Wow Diner website.

Attempts to contact the new owner for this story were unsuccessful.

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