

Jun 27 2007 8:39 AM

## School bus turns into hot dog stand

**Frank and Linda Sclafani dish up food, smiles and chit-chat**

*By Jonnie Bassaro*

*SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-TIMES*

When word spread there was an old school bus in New Milford turned into a hot dog stand, this reporter longed to find it. I wanted to meet Frank and Linda Sclafani, who had accomplished the daunting task of turning a vehicle into a food establishment.

Plus, I was dying for a good hot dog.

What tastes better on a summer day "" or any day - than a grilled hot dog slathered with mustard, relish and maybe a little sauerkraut or chili or fried onions?



*If you're in the mood for friendly conversation and a tasty hot dog, Sclafani Street Food is a great place to stop. This ?restaurant on wheels? is on Route 7, about a mile north of the New Milford traffic circle.*

With this in mind, I was becoming famished as I drove along Route 7 looking for the bus.

I found it about a mile north of the traffic circle that leads to New Milford. There it sat, looking rather pleased with itself, parked along a bank of the Housatonic River, an American flag flying from its side, picnic tables with umbrellas beckoning in a shady area next to it.

Near the road, a sign announced "Sclafani Street Food." Behind the sign, a large parking area awaited trucks and any motorist who might want to stop.

At first I felt a small pang of disappointment. I expected this bus to be school-bus yellow. (And indeed it had been at one time in its life.) I expected it to look old, maybe be a little tired and beaten up by years of carrying schoolchildren.

Instead, it had been painted a sleek red with chrome trim. A wooden platform had been installed along its side, forming a porch that was shaded by a handsome striped green awning. The row of windows normally found on a bus had been converted to two large openings so customers can step up and place their orders.

"It's a restaurant on wheels, that's what it is," said Charles Banks, Linda Sclafani's father, who was visiting the couple from his home in Florida. He was sitting at one of the picnic tables outside the bus, biting into a tempting looking hot dog topped with chili and cheese.

From where he sat, we could see the front of the bus and a sign hanging across its headlights reading "Mary's Kitchen."

"I placed that sign there for my mother," owner-chef Frank Sclafani said, extending a hand in greeting as I climbed up the steps of the bus and past the driver's seat.

"You see, when I had a roadside stand in Greenwich," Sclafani said, "my mother used to make a lot of the foods "" baked ziti, chicken Parmesan, meatballs, chili. Now she's 85 and doesn't go out often. So this way, when she sees her name on the bus, she'll feel like she's still part of the business." Mary Sclafani lives with the Sclafanis in New Milford.

Frank Sclafani is proud of the bus' new look.

"It looks like a diner, don't you think? Yep. A nice diner," he said.

The interior of the bus has been transformed into a stainless steel kitchen with a space-age look. At one end of the bus is a grill, a warming oven, a steamer, a gas-top stove. At the other end, near where the driver would sit, are refrigerators for meat, freezers for ice cream.

Sclafani's warm, ebullient manner was immediately evident as he greeted a customer.

"Your first time here?" he asked the driver of a large truck. "You'll be back! You trucking this way all the time? Got a CB? Tell every trucker you know about us."

By "us," he was referring to Linda, who married him 23 years ago and helps him daily, and his son, Frank Sclafani Jr., 20, who is studying engineering at the University of Connecticut in Storrs, but is helping his parents for the summer. The couple also has a daughter, Alissa, 22, who works in a bank in Sherman and a son Charlie, 13, who will also work with his parents this summer.

"And there's also my adopted brother "" I call him my adopted brother," Sclafani said. He was talking about Mike Ward, a retired police officer who, on this morning, was helping out in the kitchen.

"Believe me, when you've got a friend like Mike, you're blessed," Sclafani said.

"I'm just volunteering for a couple of weeks until the business gets going," Ward, an unassuming man, said. "It's already picking up. From 11:30 in the morning until about 3, people come in here nonstop."

The family opened the roadside stand about three weeks ago. Their day begins at 7 each morning when they serve breakfast.

"We do a lot of egg sandwiches," Linda Sclafani said.

And while their place of business looks like a restaurant on wheels, it definitely is a school bus.

"I found it on the Internet," Frank Sclafani said. "I had it shipped from Illinois to New Jersey to be rebuilt into a restaurant. The rebuilding was supposed to take 15 weeks. It took 15 months."

"Yeah, he used to have a little hot dog stand. Now he's a tycoon," said a customer who'd just come up to the bus' window.

Sclafani laughed. "You know that show on TV, 'The Jeffersons'? I'm movin' on up!"

His hot dogs sell for \$2.50 each. That's with mustard and relish. With chili, they're \$3.50. Hamburgers are \$4.50.

Sclafani also sells a variety of sandwiches including steak, chicken cutlet, sausage and peppers, and hot smoked sausage. He offers french fries and, if you wish, you can get them topped with chili and cheese.

"My father used to sell fish door to door," Sclafani says, "so I'm going to start carrying fish "" fried clams, fried shrimp, fried scallops -- in memory of him." His father, Frank Sclafani, who ran a seafood business in Mount Vernon, N.Y., died in 1976.

Sclafani, who grew up in Greenwich, had a roadside stand there for 20 years before moving to New Milford in 1995.

"I ran the Greenwich place from a Winnebago trailer," he said. "Everybody came there. I used to have people from White Plains driving over. I think they came as much to talk to me as to eat the hot dogs. They used to say, 'We've got 15 minutes for lunch. We'll spend that talking to you and eat the hot dogs in the car driving back.' People need to talk. They need a smile, you know?"

After moving to New Milford, he had a small restaurant on Route 7 for a brief time, then operated a maintenance business for 10 years before deciding to get into the world of food again.

"Everything here is fresh," he said. "Our customers are patient, because I cook each thing to order." He handed a hot dog through the window of the bus to Karen Henkel, who had stopped with her son, Rory Kennedy.

"I drive my son to New Milford High School," she said as she sat in the shade enjoying her order. "He insists on stopping here for sustenance. Even if we're going to have steak at home, he wants to stop here. But it's so nice to have this, rather than another strip mall."

"We get a lot of kids after soccer and baseball games," Linda Sclafani said. She met Frank Sclafani when he had the hot dog business in Greenwich.

"Did I know what I was getting into "" no," she said. "But, I love this. You know, in this world, you meet so many interesting people. It seems like they all come up to this bus."

John Barrett, family counselor who lives in Sherman and has an office in New Milford, stops at Sclafani Street Food on his way to and from work.

"I think their food is excellent," he said, speaking by telephone from his house. "They're providing an excellent service to the community. I'm not one to always crave a hot dog, but their place seems to be magnetic. It just draws you in."

Yes. It does. Plus, their hot dogs are just plain good.

Frank Sclafani looked at his wife who shares the close quarters of a bus with him every day.

"Hey Linda, maybe someday we'll retire, move to Florida, have a little hot dog stand on the beach."

"Not me," Linda Sclafani said. "We retire to Florida, I'm parking myself on that beach and just sitting there."

- Note: Sclafani Street Food, 200 Kent Road in New Milford, is open Monday and Wednesday from 7 a.m. to 5 p.m., Thursday, Friday and Saturday from 7 a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sunday from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. It's closed Tuesday.