

# Lakefront landmark Ono's & Jo's Pizza revived and up for sale

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An electrician spent six years renovating the landmark Ono's Pizza, which is now for sale.

Joseph S. Pete / Provided

For more than a half-century, generations of Miller residents and beachgoers stopped by Ono's & Jo's Pizza for pizza, Italian beef or its locally famous Sicilian sandwich.

The seaside pizza shack, a short stroll from Lake Street Beach in Gary's Miller neighborhood, shuttered for good in 2016 when longtime owner Salvatore "Sam" Rizzo died. Its menus boasted "in Miller, it's Ono's" and "the best pizza in town."

Many people thought so.

The old-school pizzeria has lived on in memory. The landmark eatery is depicted in paintings, photos and prints at the nearby Miller School Shops in downtown Miller.

An electrician from the neighborhood has been working for the past six years to renovate the property. Paulette Cialdella, who hails from a family of pizza makers, restored the restaurant building, which she is putting up for sale through Ayres Realtors.

"It was a labor of love for me," she said. "I just wanted to see this iconic place come back to life."

Josephine Rizzo and her sister Ann Massa originally opened the Beach Box at 720 N. Lake St., just steps from Lake Michigan, in 1953. They bought a hamburger stand with a counter and stools and turned it into a beach-side restaurant

that sold ham sandwiches, hot dogs and pops that originally cost 10 cents. They changed the name to Ono's & Jo's after their brother from Italy, Ono Penzato, joined the restaurant and it added pizza to the menu in 1962.

Ono's & Jo's made the dough and sauce from scratch, specializing in homemade thin-crust pies with cheese, sausage and mushrooms. The menu included Italian beef, Italian sausage, stromboli and the signature Sicilian that featured Italian sausage, peppers, garlic and four kinds of cheese.

"It's an iconic institution of Miller Beach in Gary," she said. "It should be a historic landmark in my opinion."

Cash-only until the end, the small restaurant catered mainly to take-out customers. But people also often dined at the tables out back or the bench in the front.

"I remember sitting with Sam in the big window and watching the Cubs game from the bench," said Cialdella, a Chicago native who moved to Miller in 1987. "They had really good pizza and beef. They had good food and fun. People had tons of memories there."

Cialdella bought the property and renovated it with carpenter Carlos Mateo until he drowned in Lake Michigan on the Fourth of July.

"Me and him were doing the project and had a lot of fun until he passed away," she said. "We designed everything together, but I had to finish it on my own. He called it the compound because it has five buildings. He asked me if I was going to the compound and that was the last time I ever saw him. He was such a talented guy. I think he was a shop teacher and he was a licensed Gary contractor. He would be happy to see it finished."

Cialdella came up with a new design for the restaurant: a California-style beachfront walk-up. It has a large pickup window, 25 seats inside and 12 more in a party room in a separate building out back, a repurposed beach cottage.

The 1,144-square-foot main dining room features a bar and a three-way liquor license.

"It was in bad shape when I bought it," she said. "Now it's just beautiful."

Her family has owned such pizzerias as Danny's Pizza in Calumet Park and Labriola Bakery Café & Neapolitan Pizzeria in Oak Brook. But she has no interest in running one herself. She's an electrician by trade who's close to retirement and "busy as hell."

She put in long hours renovating the property in her spare time over the past few years.

"It was a lot of hard work. I was often painting or demoing until midnight. It was rewarding. It was fun. It was a creative outlet for me. Everything was gutted and is brand-new, down to the studs. It needed some tender loving care."

Many people stopped by to share their memories while she sat outside on the beach during the project.

"Generations of people went there," she said. "It's a landmark. It's on T-shirts and mugs."

The restaurant had deteriorated over the years.

"It was overgrown. It probably wouldn't still be standing if we hadn't taken ahold of it," she said. "It would be lost forever. We had the courage to take on the project. Now we need someone to pick it up and run with it."

The Ono's & Jo's space has a lot of potential because of the South Shore Line double tracking, the Lake Street improvements and the national park designation. Ono's and Jo's is just down the street from Miller Woods in the Indiana Dunes National Park and a short drive from West Beach, its biggest and most popular beach.

She hopes a buyer will revive it as a pizzeria to take advantage of the well-known brand and said the business could double as an ice cream shop or small neighborhood grocery.

"We built it as a beach concession at the north end of Lake Street," she said. "The whole area's going to pop. It's preserving the history for the new age of Miller as it revitalizes."

For more information, call 219-938-1188 or visit [millerbeach.com](http://millerbeach.com).