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La Loggia draws in a high-profile legal crowd

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Given the frequent overnight changes in downtown Miami — suddenly there are luxury residences, the Miami Tower’s switched colors (not to mention owners) and a favorite Flagler Street shop is boarded up — it’s nice to know there are a few things you can count on. One of them is that come lunchtime, Circuit Court Judge Jose Rodriguez will be seated on the patio of La Loggia Ristorante & Lounge, an Italian eatery located directly across the street from the Miami-Dade County Courthouse. Judge Rodriguez, while holding a lit cigar and sitting squarely in front of a Diet Coke on ice, politely declined to comment for this article. But if you’re willing to trust the words of the city’s most high-profile lawyers (humor me, here) this judge and his cigar are a daily fixture at the restaurant’s front.

Since opening in 2001, La Loggia’s door has been streaming with the kind of lawyers who pull business cards from their suit pockets the way cowboys draw guns. And that paper is frequently printed with a name that’s loaded. For this legal crowd, part of the restaurant’s appeal is the location — right in the judicial epicenter on Flagler Street — but patrons also gush about the homemade pastas and the speedy service. The combination of it all has created a micro-culture here, with diners staking claim to identifiable tables they occupy so reliably, they’re easier to find at lunchtime than perhaps if you were to dial their cellphones all day long.

“The legal community will stop by and see who they need to be talking to,” says commercial litigation attorney Michael I. Rose, just before heading up a nine-lawyer table lunching to discuss the emergency sealing of records in a Brazilian national’s bankruptcy suit. “It’s an opportunity to discuss cases in the pipeline or make deals with other business associates and lawyers.”

That same Friday, coming directly from the investiture of Circuit Court Judge Darrin Gayles, a table so powerful I risked electrocution when taking the one empty seat: United States Federal Judge Marcia Cooke; assistant county attorney Cynthia Johnson-Stacks; Village of Pinecrest attorney Cynthia A. Everett; North Miami city attorney Lynn Whitfield; County Court Administrative Judge Teretha Lundy Thomas; and the five-minute-late arrival of — I rose to vacate her chair — family and probate lawyer Latricia C. Donley.

American Bar Association members and committee heads Melanie Damian and Peter F. Valori were there too, ritually ordering the whole-wheat pasta bolognese while working hard to sway Florida Bar Business Law chair Michael J. Heiger into steering a portion of his leadership efforts toward the bar organization’s national arm. Heiger, apparently familiar with the payoffs of preparation, arrived at lunch armed with one of his young associates, whom he seemed to be offering up in his place. Just toward the back, maritime attorney and Cuban Bar Association presidential candidate Raúl Chacón Jr. had decided on the day’s salad special — a Texas variety with chicken, chopped bacon, feta, guacamole and black beans — while waiting for a friend from the State Attorney’s office. It was a social lunch at which he’d

planned to discuss the lobbying effort for funding the League of Prosecutors.

Also dining that day, City National Bank CFO Dan Kushner, ordering the salad special; white collar criminal attorney Peter Prieto, eating spaghetti and shrimp at the bar; forensic accountant Randy Kroner, tucking into a steak sandwich on focaccia bread; police-chiefs-turned-investigation-consultants Don DeLuca and John Timoney, having — let's face it, a disappointing lunch for a couple of tough guys at an Italian restaurant — two salad specials; and Judge Pedro Echarte Jr., finishing the roasted turkey sandwich with Swiss cheese and avocado.

It wasn't difficult for La Loggia to court this clientele, seeing as the restaurant's concept was pretty much its idea in the first place, says Jennifer Porciello, who opened the place with her husband Horacio Oliveira in 2001, after the couple owned the popular but casual downtown eatery, Giovana Café, from 1996 to 2000.

"All our clients were saying, "We love your bistro but this is not a place we can take our clients,"" she says. "We have to have a spot where we can wine and dine downtown — and my husband was listening." So closely that when the famous across-the-courthouse spot known as Sally Russell's became available, this spousal team jumped at the chance to sign the lease. They immediately cut windows in the dining room walls, raised the ceilings, and installed the delicate mosaic touches adorning the place today. When the doors first opened, remembers Porciello, people were lining up for lunch. And now, they come for a whole lot more.

Says Heiger: "All the business in the court system happens here. Cases get settled and disputes get worked out. And the food is great to boot."

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