

15 MINUTES

Trash talk and the best dog in town

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In a gravelly, beaten down parking lot a block north of Winkler Avenue on Fowler Street, you may have noticed the stainless steel hot dog cart that's been there five days a week for 16 years. At 10:30 a.m. last Friday under a grey sky, Joe D'Acunto, the owner and Brooklyn native who moved to Florida in 1991, already had a crowd. Two middle-aged guys sat in white plastic chairs in front of the stand smoking cigarettes as the considerable traffic buzzed by. And they were a couple of jokers.

"They'll break your balls," D'Acunto said, with a Brooklyn growl. He's clean cut, blunt and sort of kind, without being smarmy. "Don't pay attention to these two."

And that they did — mine and D'Acunto's.

"Hey Josephine, your hot dogs gave me heartburn yesterday," one laughed.

One claimed to be from Ohio, one from Montana, but the Eastern seaboard wit gave them away.

"He's the bouncer!" one said pointing at the other.

"And he's the golf pro!" the other one accused.

It sounded like an episode of "Car Talk."

Another guy showed up — thick, slicked back graying hair, sunglasses, tight black t-shirt, a silver cross.

"Where you gonna get a better hot dog than this?" he demanded. "Fuggetabout it!"



Joe D'Acunto

PHOTO EVAN WILLIAMS

As a woman walked across the parking lot, one quipped, "Hey, that's (Joe's) ex-wife, Ask him about that!"

Actually, D'Acunto has a wife and daughter. They both work at Publix, he said, and the family lives in Fort Myers. He also has two sons who went to the University of South Florida in Tampa. Both got their Masters. One is a high school teacher, and the other is a promotions director for Fox News in Tampa.

It was a cool day, and still early, but the stand was already starting to get hit with its lunch rush. People came because they were regulars, obviously familiar with the man. Three men who work at a body shop all stopped by for some hot dogs,

sausages, and sodas.

"They're good, man," one said.

D'Acunto spun around the stand, making up the dogs with mustard, relish, ketchup, making change, and taking a cell-phone call.

"That was the tax collector's office," he said. "They just ordered 12 hot dogs. Yesterday, they ordered 20."

They were already on the way to pick up the order, and D'Acunto picked up the pace, slinging a little New York wit to go with all the mustard.

Another guy who looked like he was working in an auto body shop walked up, hungry.

"Let's do a little mustard, a little kraut,"

the man said.

"He's a regular, too!" D'Acunto said.

"You're the first guy that's ever called me regular!" the guy shot back.

"Who's gonna sell me if I don't sell myself?" D'Acunto asked the crowd.

"What a clown he's become!" one of the jokers said. "Hey D'Acunto, you got any nickel bags?"

"All right boss, take it easy," D'Acunto said.

Everyone seemed to know everyone, and being there could be intimidating for a tourist to this little patch of Fort Myers made from big city cloth, but once you're in, you are in. And it's a party.

"People that came here when they were kids, and now they're adults and they come here, with their own kids," D'Acunto said. "Some of my customers have died off. Seriously! I'm not blowing this up."

D'Acunto sells Sabrett hot dogs, made in Brooklyn ("We're on a roll," is the motto), and he explains that the ones he buys are left in the casing. That makes them more flavorful, he said, because it traps the juices. He also sells Thurman's Sweet Italian Sausage, soda, chips, and a variety of classic condiments.

One dog with mustard and sweet onion relish and a Mountain Dew was perfect: delicious, nostalgic, and directly related to D'Acunto's New York childhood. He also spent 32 years there in the fresh fish wholesale business.

He's been in this same parking lot for 16 years, because "God told me to stop here," (he also likes the weather). ■

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