

## Witticisms, choices are both in abundance at Caruso's

Patrick Jacobs

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### If you go

Caruso's Sandwich Company, 202  
Ironwood, Suite A, Coeur d'Alene,  
(208) 765-1001

John Lennon once sang, "Life is what happens when you're busy making other plans."

This and various bits of wit and wisdom adorn Caruso's walls on big, eye-catching placards made of neatly pressed black plastic letters. Perhaps they're there merely to offer ponderous conversation points to customers, or perhaps they're the senior project of an especially unimaginative typography student.

Taking them all into consideration while enjoying lunch there recently, I came to realize the connection between all these quotable quips: They do a good job of explaining the Caruso's experience itself. "Quality means doing it right when no one is looking," reads one sign, hung in an obscure spot high near the back of the kitchen. Since relocating to North Idaho and opening their first deli in 1999, Vince and Shell Caruso have built themselves a miniature empire based on quality, and it seems like everyone was looking.

Franchise opportunity seekers were paying attention for sure, and now there are four Caruso's locations in the area with more to come. Each store is clean and inviting, and they do a consistently knock-out job of providing the finest and freshest ingredients for an exceedingly affordable price.

Caruso's offers the cure for the not-so-fresh feeling one often experiences at other sandwich establishments. There simply is no comparison, and also unlike the chain places, it's refreshingly free of teen angst and attitude behind the counter. The folks that run the Caruso's show actually act like they enjoy their jobs and are having a good time.

It's unusual behavior for sure, but as another one of their signs says, "Why be normal?" A duo of these wordy wall boards claim that "If confusion is the first step to knowledge, I must be a genius," and that "Confusion is our most important product."

Depending on the time of day, a visit to Caruso's can indeed seem a bit overwhelming. The menu alone is disorienting with so many terrific food possibilities. I've been to Caruso's later in the afternoon and things are somewhat quiet and relaxing, but come during the lunch rush and you can expect to mingle with a large and diverse crowd. Fortunately, Caruso's staff has the ability to keep things moving right along, and even on the busiest of days, I've never had to wait more than a few minutes in line to order and a few minutes to pick up my lunch.

With high industrial ceilings and plenty of table space, the restaurant has the air of a community gathering place, a sense of public activity that draws everyone in. Nurses come to check the pulses of the hot Italian Stallion sandwiches, and police officers show up to arrest Meatball Subs for the crime of existence while committing brutal acts of sloppiness and enforcing strict napkin laws.

"Do or no do, there is no try." These powerful words were once spoken by the wise Jedi Master Yoda and are now captured on one of Caruso's brightly painted walls. There's a lot to try – and to do – on Caruso's menu, the main attraction being the specialty sandwiches themselves.

"We bake our bread daily" isn't exactly another witty quote, but it is an obvious truth; the just-baked aroma is alluring and strong when first entering the place.

A half-loaf size affair should be sufficient for all but the mightiest of appetites. The Caruso's Club piles turkey, ham, bacon and Swiss cheese high with all the veggies. The Italian Dip is pastrami and provolone cheese served hot with au jus. For meat haters who still love Italy, the Mozza Ball combines fresh mozzarella cheese with tomatoes, red onions and romaine. Caruso's sandwiches aren't overloaded with unnecessary sauces and toppings, allowing the simple, primary flavors of the breads, meats and cheeses to shine through.

My personal perpetual favorites are the roast beef and cheddar with avocado on sourdough, and the basic tuna on wheat, which uses a form of albacore so divine it makes what the chains offer seem suddenly very fishy. A recent experiment with the Caesar Salad Chicken Wrap was another coup; it was overstuffed with ingredients and flavor.

Soups are homemade and at least three different varieties are on offer each day along with tossed green salads and a scattering of pasta or potato salads. On a recent visit I tried a red potato salad that was incredible. Large hunks of soft, skin-on potatoes and dill

pickles were mixed with plenty of fresh dill in a delicate, creamy sauce. It was enough to make one wish Aunt Franny would start bringing this to the family barbecue instead of her usual mustard and egg slop.

“The best way to make your dreams come true is to wake up.”

This sign must refer to the extensive menu of espresso beverages, breakfast sandwiches and muffins awaiting Caruso's early birds each day. Also in the “things you'll never see at Subway” department is the fact that they serve both bottled and draught beer and run a happy hour between 4 and 7 p.m. daily, with both domestic and micro pints under two dollars. Cheers to that idea. The sign right above the entry reads “It's not the employer who pays the wages, they just handle the money. It's the customer who pays the wages.” In that case, this happy customer says to give everyone a raise.

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