

Jeff Around Town – May 31st, 2024

Otis: Ah, yes, it's 8:45 on this Friday, which could mean only one thing. Well, it could mean two things. But in this case, it means Jeff.

Jeff: Otis, good morning.

Otis: How are you, buddy?

Jeff: Doing well.

Otis: Hey, what's up today?

Jeff: Well, Otis, I know that you love Italy. We'll go back to Italy now after being in France. Have you been to Pisa?

Otis: I have not. I have not made that particular side trip. I have not.

Jeff: Yeah, even for those who haven't been, you have no doubt seen photos. You're familiar with that famous Leaning Tower of Pisa.

Otis: Yeah.

Jeff: Well, how about Omaha's very own Leaning Tower of Peppi?

Otis: Yeah, okay.

Jeff: Now, granted, this famous Omaha icon was only leaning for a very short time, and you might have missed it. And if you're from here, there's a very good chance you've seen what might be Omaha's most famous troubadour, even though you've never actually heard him sing or play. And if you're just visiting, he's pretty famous beyond Omaha. And I'm talking about that mandolin-playing neon sign Peppi, the famed logo for La Casa restaurant.

Otis: I know.

Jeff: Yeah, and although I always thought, Otis, that it was Pepe like Pepe Le Pew.

Otis: No?

Jeff: No, no. I was recently hanging out with Victor Hahn, who corrected me. It's actually Peppi with an I. Now, La Casa is family-owned, and they've got other locations. The original location is run by Nicole Jesse, Daniel Emsak, Brandon Hahn, and Victor. And Victor, Otis, you may know, was a former KVNO host back in the day.

Otis: Yeah, oh, yeah.

Jeff: Yeah, and he had a show. One of his shows was *If Beethoven Were Alive Today*. Well, Peppi is alive and well, and it all started with his grandparents, who were immigrants from Sicily, Joe and Nellie Pitani. And they bought this house on 45th and Leavenworth.

Otis: Right.

Jeff: And in 1953, decided to turn it into a restaurant. So that was La Casa, their house, back in the day.

Otis: The house.

Jeff: The house, yeah. And a few years later, Joe hired an artist who designed Pepp with that handlebar mustache and that mandolin and those wonderful cartoon feet.

Otis: Makes me hungry when I see it.

Jeff: I know.

Otis: Okay.

Jeff: And Joe was actually Giuseppe. You had some Giuseppe Verdi earlier. So, it's possible that Peppi comes from his name. It's just one of those names that you hear.

Otis: Yeah.

Jeff: And so this artist, though, Otis, is unknown. But for me, as a cartoonist and a mandolin player growing up in Omaha, Peppi always inspired me. Yes, it makes you hungry, but there's also this warmth to him, this friendly, inviting kindness. So now about that Leaning Tower of Peppi. A few years ago, I don't know if you remember this, a large truck hit the sign.

Otis: Oh, I do. I had forgotten.

Jeff: And although he wasn't leaning, he was leaning for a little while, but he was taken to the Neon Sign Hospital where he was fixed up again. And maybe, I don't know, given a transfusion of neon. So, while he was healing up at the sign hospital, the restaurant took all these calls from people driving by who didn't see Peppi.

Otis: You're not closed, are you?

Jeff: No, they were worried.

Otis: Yeah, you know what I mean?

Jeff: I was one of those people who were worried. They said, no, no, no, it's fine. And this, Otis, goes to show you how observant Omahans are and how important Peppi is on Leavenworth there. But the good news, Peppi...

Otis: ... is back.

Jeff: He's here to stay. And years ago, he was even given an Omaha, I don't know if you know this, an Omaha landmark status by Landmarks Heritage Preservation Commission. So, if you're not from Omaha and you're visiting, you might have heard of Peppi. La Casa was once an answer on...

Otis: Jeopardy.

Jeff: On Jeopardy! Exactly. And Peppi also made a cameo in the 2016 Alexander Payne film, *Downsizing*, starring Matt Damon.

Otis: Huh.

Jeff: Although Peppi didn't have any lines and wasn't singing. And even though he once tipped over, he never fell and was never downsized. So, Peppi even once landed in a cartoon for the Omaha World Herald by yours truly.

Otis: By Jeff Koterba.

Jeff: You can see it over the entryway to the bar. And again, after a lifetime of living here, Otis, and being inspired by him, I now know the real spelling of Peppi, who might be the most famous Peppi, the most famous troubadour in Omaha. You've never heard sing or play a note. But, Otis, what do you imagine him playing on that mandolin?

Otis: I don't know, some Rossini?

Jeff: Rossini, exactly.

Otis: I would think. It's got to be Rossini.

Jeff: It's got to be Rossini. Otis, that's another Jeff Around Town.

Otis: Yeah, thanks, buddy. Jeff Around Town. First day I was in Omaha when I wasn't from Omaha yet. Somebody, my friend who was from Omaha, took me to La Casa.

Jeff: La Casa.

Otis: Jeff Around Town's going to be Fridays, 8:45, all the time. Peppi. Now I'm hungry. Here's some Rossini.