

NEIGHBORHOOD NOSH

BY MARY S. GILBERT



Deck the Garage

The plain strands of white lights that adorn the outside of Bob's Garage are hardly fair warning for the visual spectacle you'll find inside this local treasure on the edge of O'Hara Township. Think wall-to-wall, filled-to-the-rafters, over-the-top, in-your-face, unabashed flamboyance.

"You can tell the people who've never been here before," says Bob Paganico, owner of the legendary bar and eatery. "Their mouths drop." It's an understandable reaction.

Bob's Garage celebrates Christmas, St. Patrick's Day, Easter, summer, and Halloween with thousands of holiday decorations festooning every possible inch of space of the small, wooden building. The decorations range from handmade to store-bought, from tasteful to tacky.

Christmas is the ultimate showstopper, bringing whole new meaning to *Deck the Halls* with more than—count 'em!—10,000 decorations installed each year by a team of loyal



Owner Bob Paganico.

During the holiday season, newcomers to Bob's Garage gasp when they walk in and see the decorations.

volunteers and staff working round-the-clock for two full days.

Paganico is especially fond of the 200 sets of lights with 150 lights apiece, which intertwine with miles of garlands, wreaths, ornaments, Santa Clauses, snowmen, presents, bows, stockings, candy canes, animated figurines, and paper cutouts of wintry scenes. The centerpiece is a toy train chugging around a track mounted above the bar.

"You could sit here for three hours looking at everything and still find something you hadn't seen before," describes Paganico's wife, Trona. "You're in a daze, like a child. If you weren't in the Christmas spirit when you came in, you sure are now. People say there's no place like it anywhere."

While Christmas is an apparent family favorite—the couple's game room at home is decorated all year for the holiday—the other three seasonal displays at Bob's Garage hold their own. Come spring, shamrocks and pastel bunnies commingle in a combined St. Patrick's Day and Easter display. The palm trees and firecrackers of summer then give way to the requisite spider webs and skeletons of Halloween.

Amazingly, Paganico has never developed a design layout for his decorations.

"I know where everything goes, and I know if anything is missing," he explains. "It all was just originally in my head. I've never had a plan."

Paganico is actually the third owner of Bob's Garage named Bob, having followed original owner Bob Van Pelt and his successor, Bob Holden. He started working as a bartender there in 1970, conceiving the holiday-decorating idea three years later as a means to brighten the space.

"Back then it was popular to be in dark cocktail lounges," Paganico recalls. "There were no windows like there are now, so it was dark, like walking into the inside of a barn. I wanted to add some color so it wouldn't look so drab, and we just got more and more decorations each year."

The inventory represents a significant financial investment, with the Christmas decorations alone worth at least \$14,000. Paganico spends about \$2,000 annually to replenish what breaks or is stolen when customers occasionally help themselves to souvenirs. Storage also is a factor, with Christmas kept under wraps in a warehouse and the remaining materials stockpiled in his Penn Hills home.

While food may seem incidental in the face of the trimmings, Paganico has begun placing more emphasis on his menu, which includes a range of sandwiches and burgers



Top: Tropical decorations fill some spaces, while an all-American theme fills others during the summer months.
Above: Jack-o'-lanterns and ghouls abound in the fall.
Left: Green is the theme and lucky charms dominate during spring.

(\$4.50 to \$8.25), along with salads, soups, and bar munchies. The triple-decker Dagwood sandwich is a Friday special. An open face 10-ounce New York strip (\$15.95) makes an appearance after 4 o'clock. And Sunday breakfast features reasonably priced, hearty portions of French toast, eggs, sausage patties or bacon, and home fries.

"In the beginning I said that we were a high-class shot-and-a-beer place," Paganico says. "But we've always had a decent sandwich. Our signature dishes are burgers, Reubens, and our turkey Devonshire, which uses the same recipe served by the old Park Schenley restaurant in Oakland. I want to step it up a notch so that you make it a point to come to Bob's Garage for a sandwich, for something to eat—and we're almost there."

In the spirit of Christmas, the watering hole's specialty drink is bartender Melanie Kleist's Naughty and Nice (\$5.50), a decadent concoction of hot chocolate, amaretto, dark crème de cacao, whipped cream, crème de menthe, and a cherry on top. She rims the glass margarita-style with crushed candy canes instead of salt.

As much fun as it is to decorate for the holidays, for years Bob's Garage has perpetuated another more meaningful tradition, which shares the Christmas spirit with our area's underprivileged children and elderly residents.

From the bar's earliest days, patrons would toss change into an upturned umbrella, and the collection was used to buy gifts and food for those most in need. In 1987, Paganico and his customers and staff formalized their giving in The Spirit of Christmas, Inc., a nonprofit corporation that has raised more than \$250,000 through private contributions and public fundraisers. Those activities run the gamut from guest bartender days that showcase the mixology talents of local celebrities to the regular who makes and sells 150 pounds of sausage.

"The focus is to create Christmas memories for the families by providing toys, clothes, food, and other necessities they could not afford otherwise," Paganico explains. "The names come from area licensed social service organizations and churches. Our customers and staff contact the families to find out what they need or want for Christmas, shop for and wrap the items, and then deliver them along with Giant Eagle gift cards on Christmas Eve afternoon."

Such generosity is indicative of the open, comfortable feeling that Paganico cultivates year-round at Bob's Garage. "The main thing is that we're a part of the community," he shares. "It's a friendly atmosphere, and both Bob's Garage and our customers try to help anyone in trouble."

Bob's Garage is located at 1372 Freepport Road in O'Hara Township. Hours are 11 a.m. to 2 a.m. daily. On weekdays the kitchen stays open until 11 p.m. It closes between midnight and 1 a.m. on weekends. For more information, phone 412-963-9552.

WORTH®

...a luxury line of women's clothing.



Worth is designed in Manhattan, made of the finest European fabrics and constructed with exceptional attention to detail.

Sold by appointment only. Seasonal In-Home Trunk Shows

From the Collection's quality, versatility and value, to the time savings and attentive service afforded by our stylists, everything about the experience is so special, you will never enjoy as much any other kind of shopping.

Holiday Gift Certificates available.

For an invitation to the next trunk show contact:

COURTNEY MYHRUM
412-782-2646
cmvhrum@worthcollection.com

Sizes 0-20, Petites Available
WORTHNY.COM

Vanilla PASTRY STUDIO

Custom Cakes • Cupcakes
Lollies • Cookies • Brownies
Candies • Muffins

6014 Penn Circle South
412.361.2306 • vanillastry.com
Tues-Fri: 9-6 • Sat: 9-4 • Sun: 10-2