



## game changer

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**more than a pinball wizard, this descendant of new jersey hospitality legends trailblazed his own diversified path**

by laura d.c. kolnoski • photos by robert nuzzie

In its heyday, Ilvento's West End Manor hotel and restaurant in Long Branch attracted the likes of Milton Berle, Carol Burnett, Joe DiMaggio, and Diana Ross. Owners Charlie and Lucille Ilvento moved their family's original Jersey City eatery to the seaside city in 1949, becoming stalwart members of the community. Charlie joined the local fire department and received a full fireman's funeral when he passed away in 2013 at age 95. A slew of family members worked at the grand dining and banquet facility, including grandson Robert, known as Rob.

Rob attended Rutgers University, where he and his fellow football players tired of a steady pizza diet. Rob's brother, studying at Syracuse University, introduced him to Buffalo wings and their addictive sauce, prompting the budding entrepreneur to open Cluck University Chicken in 1985, where he employed "half the Rutgers football team." He sold the company in 1999, but retained rights to the sauce recipes.

Seeking a better French fry, Ilvento soon founded the Jersey Shore Fry Company, catching the attention of Canada's Cavendish Farms, which convinced him to use their potatoes, grown on Prince Edward Island, with flavor enhanced by sea salt. The resulting boardwalk-style fries are now sold in thousands of restaurants east of the Mississippi, and expansion westward is imminent.



He then created his own Jersey Shore Pizza Shells, introduced the red onion ring, and is currently working on "an anti-aging herbal water elixir," a marked evolution from the red sauce classics served by his parents and grandparents.

Among the Garden State spots serving the fries and "Cluck U" chicken is the Silverball Museum on the Asbury Park boardwalk, created and owned by Ilvento and his long time friend and business partner, Steve Zuckerman. The year-'round attraction, initially located in a small space on Cookman Avenue, is now one of the city's primary draws. Relocated to the boardwalk in 2009, the retro gamer paradise is credited as integral to drawing the public back to the boardwalk. Like Ilvento's other business ventures, it began organically, then underwent a logical progression, but was in part attributable to his daughter's autism and her discovery of pinball.



"Morgan took to pinball machines like she didn't take to anything else," said Ilvento, who spent much of his own youth in arcades on the same boardwalk. "I started amassing machines for her at my home in Princeton. It was a herculean feat. I realized Silverball would be a great way to archive them. It was a natural to locate it in Asbury. Because we're open daily except Christmas, Silverball made it so every day is a good day to come to Asbury Park."

Inside is a lively, nostalgic ode to Americana—a rotating inventory of hundreds of vintage, rare, and modern pinball and arcade games that can be played by the public. Games include old school classics like Skee-ball, Pong, Pacman, and Donkey Kong sitting beside the more technologically advanced Lord of the Rings, Simpsons, and Indiana Jones titles. A 1932 Ballyhoo is the oldest game, while a limited-edition Big Boy, valued at \$25,000, is the most expensive. Two are from 1933—Juggleball and an Army/Navy Game machine—in the latter's case one of only nine known to exist. Ilvento and his staff also buy, sell, and repair games.

"It's like the antiques market; we get offers from all over the world," he said. "Some are true museum pieces. We pay close attention to details...and the details of the details," he explained of his business approach. "Also, every employee must be a nice person and be great to customers...customer service is rule number one. I only hire nice people."

Of Zuckerman, founder and former owner of the Clipper shopper magazines, Ilvento said, "We're more brothers than partners. We both have an affinity for pinball. I bought the first Clipper cover to advertise Cluck U Chicken."

Last year, Ilvento opened a second, larger location in a two-level stand-alone building with a full bar and restaurant in trendy and retro Delray, Florida, near his parents' home. To be near them and his thriving second location, Ilvento also purchased a home; he lives on a boat formerly owned by the late country music and sausage legend Jimmy Dean.



In Asbury, the energetic, multi-tasking entrepreneur has long sought to expand his often crowded Silverball location. He's currently negotiating to take over an additional first floor adjacent space, as well as three spaces above, which he'll turn into, "a full family entertainment center." It will be "a global destination," he explained, with a bar, veranda, expanded menu, and party space.

Bold face names frequent Asbury's Silverball, just as notables flocked to Ilvento's West End Manor in Rob's grandparents' day. Area resident Southside Johnny Lyons is a regular. Band leader Paul Shaeffer has fingered the flippers, as has Anthony Bourdain, Wendy Williams, and none other than Bruce Springsteen. The Boss showed up recently, alone and wearing his motorcycle helmet. He paid the entry fee unrecognized, and played his favorite machine, Rock Star, which he once featured in a music video. Ilvento gave him a tour and they had a nice chat over a beer at the Langosta Lounge next door. Just another day in Asbury Park.

Famous folks have also explored the Delray location on NE 3rd Avenue, selected for its mid-century retro chic vibe and vibrant nightlife. "Delray is a perfect fit," said Ilvento. "Asbury is a city by the sea, and Delray is a village by the sea." Radio legend Bruce "Cousin Brucie" Morrow lives nearby and stopped in recently to see for himself what he was hearing about. Impressed, he performed his live Sirius XM Radio Show there in May for charity, bringing along his friend and fellow local, Connie Frances.

Philanthropy goes hand in glove with Ilvento's businesses. His annual March Special Needs Awareness Day and Gala, held in Asbury, raises about \$15,000. A similar event will debut this October in Delray, involving former NFL Quarterback Dan Marino and pro golfer Ernie Els, both fathers to autistic children. The restaurant there serves a fresh coastal menu in addition to classic boardwalk favorites offered at both locations (including hot dogs, pretzels, funnel cakes, ice cream, and candy). A live DJ spins on certain nights. Expansion possibilities exist, as Ilvento

Meanwhile, Ilvento's resume' is expanding into a new realm; he recently completed a 170-page screenplay titled The Rumble, a factual account of the first collegiate football game, played in 1869 at Rutgers, between the college home team and Princeton Universities. Rutgers won 6-4.

"It was a big rivalry, and a competition that not many people know about," he related. "It was a violent game with several fights that led to the formalization of rules. I told it the way I thought it should be told, revealing all the connections between the schools."

Next stop, Hollywood.

Silverball Museum  
1000 Ocean Avenue, Asbury Park / 732.774.4994  
silverballmuseum.com.