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## **FBI agent details life on Gambino crew**

A day at the office doesn't involve an office when you're a Westchester mobster.

What it does involve is food.

Lots of food.

But, like other professions, it is high stress. The ability to make money for the company is highly prized. It's not a 9–5 gig.

And, as FBI Agent Joaquin "Jack" Garcia found out when he infiltrated the Westchester–based crew of the Gambino crime family capo, Gregory DePalma, mob violence in the suburbs isn't a back–alley affair. It can be meted out in high–end department stores, can be visited upon poor performers in the swankest of locales.

Garcia, posing as a Florida jewel thief named Jack Falcone, spent more than two years with DePalma, a veteran and admitted gangster, gaining his trust and getting close enough to him that DePalma wanted to put him up for formal induction in the mob. DePalma was the top mobster, the chief gangster executive, in the affluent county.

"If you had any reason to be in contact with organized crime in Westchester County, you knew Greg DePalma," he writes in his new book, "Making Jack Falcone."

For DePalma, his crew and mobsters in the suburbs, crime was a 24/7 business, Garcia said in a recent interview. The boss was aging but still demanding. There was only one family that mattered to him. The Gambino crime family. Your own family came second.

"Greg had a hair–trigger temper," Garcia said. "He would go off. Just the way he carried himself, he was a very menacing type of guy."

Garcia's work was largely responsible for taking down DePalma and the entire reputed hierarchy of the Gambino crime family. More than 30 reputed leaders, members, and associates of the family were indicted by a federal grand jury in March 2005. All of them pleaded guilty, except for DePalma. He went to trial and was convicted of racketeering.

But he spent every day of the two years before his arrest committing crime. And Garcia was there to

document it:

### **Breakfast of wiseguys**

9 a.m., breakfast meeting, Eastchester Odyssey Diner.

DePalma liked to start each day at the Eastchester Odyssey.

Made members or associates, sometimes extortion victims, would come to meet DePalma.

And they would eat.

"Eggs, sausage, everything," Garcia said.

Breakfast would last two hours. The conversation usually centered around current events.

"Talking about what's in the paper," he said.

The gravel-voiced DePalma was desperate to regain his standing as a capo when he was released from prison in February 2003 after serving a 70-month sentence for racketeering. He was all about the money when he came out. The feds thought he was washed up; he'd been caught talking on tape and that had led to his conviction as well as that of John Gotti Jr. in the Scores strip-club extortion case.

"They thought he was a 'brokester,'" Garcia said using the gangland term for a mobster without the means to make money.

But DePalma, even at 72 and saddled with a host of ailments, soon proved everyone wrong. Within days of his release, he was reclaiming his old shakedown schemes – construction companies and a Bronx strip joint. Within a month of his release, he had regained his "stripes" as a captain.

They switched locations after DePalma spotted an FBI surveillance van near the diner. They moved to Bentley's in Tuckahoe.

But the routine didn't change.

There was never a problem until the check came.

Mobsters hate to pay.

For anything.

"When the bill comes, they all become T-Rex," Garcia said. "They all had the little hands, nobody's going in their pockets. So everybody's a dinosaur, it's like Jurassic Park."

### **Family visit**

11 a.m., United Hebrew Geriatric Center, New Rochelle.

DePalma visited the home every day. That's where his son Craig, also a reputed member of the Gambinos, was in a persistent vegetative state, the result of a prison suicide attempt in 2002.

The father made sure the son had music in the room, mementos and pictures all around. Gregory DePalma's wife, Teri, blamed the father for the son's suicide attempt. Garcia said she thought Gregory DePalma was the one who had gotten his son into the mob life. The father tried everything to get his son out of the coma, even bringing in a voodoo practitioner and injecting him with Botox.

But his son's well-being wasn't his only reason for visiting the home. DePalma thought his son's room was a safe place to meet extortion victims and co-conspirators – from construction to sports memorabilia and gambling.

"Greg conducted business as if, you know, he was at a regular diner," Garcia said.

The way it worked in the construction industry was pretty simple, DePalma told Garcia.

"He would say every construction job in New York, they got to pay a mob tax," Garcia said. "Two percent."

Envelopes full of cash were passed to DePalma by construction executives and contractors who came to "visit" Craig.

At the center, Garcia said he saw some of the criminal menace of the father. He would berate and taunt sick, elderly patients.

"That's when I really felt the worst," Garcia said. "Being there and being around these poor people who were subjected to that."

Garcia said he was never sure if DePalma cared for Craig because he was a fellow mobster or because he was his son. For DePalma, the Gambinos came first. He told Garcia that early on.

After the business was done, it was time to eat again.

"Hey Jackie Boy,' he'd say, 'Where we gonna eat?'" Garcia said.

### **'Mob school'**

1:30 p.m., La Villetta restaurant, Larchmont.

Food was dangerous for Garcia. And not just because he was 390 pounds. Cuisine is serious business for mobsters. Garcia was a native Cuban pretending to be Italian. He had the benefit of attending a "mob school" under the tutelage of veteran FBI Special Agent Nat Parisi where he learned the proper pronunciation of Italian dishes. But he knew one misstep, even one as simple as not pronouncing menu items correctly, could be his undoing.

DePalma loved La Villetta, he said.

"The chef was great," Garcia said.

DePalma also had his car washed every day at a place on Route 1. He went through three cars in the two years Garcia was with him. First was a PT Cruiser, then a Ford Thunderbird convertible and finally a Chrysler 300. Scratches were immediately buffed out at a body shop in Port Chester. The outside was immaculate.

"But the inside looked like a bomb went off," Garcia said.

They conducted some business at the restaurant. If DePalma met with another "made" or official member, they'd leave Garcia and go to a separate table. Garcia knew not to raise an eyebrow at what would seem to be rudeness.

"Basic courtesy, you would say, what the hell is that?" he said. "All these little nuances that the mob does."

### **The strip joint**

5 p.m., The Mirage strip club, the Bronx.

Garcia, whose cover was that he was a jewel thief and stolen-goods fence, headed to the strip club to meet with other wiseguys and their associates.

DePalma went back to the nursing home. Both men left the restaurant with plates of food.

But there were nights when they had other business to conduct and didn't part company.

### **Ugly argument**

6 p.m., Bloomingdale's, the housewares department, White Plains.

DePalma, reputed acting capo Robert Vaccaro, and Garcia went to Bloomingdale's looking for another reputed Gambinos member, Peter "Petey Chops" Vicini of the Bronx. Vicini, an allegedly successful gambling racketeer, wasn't making his visits – and payments – to his capo, DePalma.

A couple of weeks before federal authorities arrested the 32 reputed Gambinos, DePalma, Vaccaro and Garcia caught up with Vicini in Bloomingdale's, where he liked to eat dinner with his girlfriend in the restaurant. Vicini and DePalma started arguing. Vaccaro, Garcia said, grabbed a \$95 crystal Kosta Boda candleholder and bashed Vicini in the skull.

DePalma was acquitted of that assault at his trial. It was the only act of physical violence he was charged with in the case.

### **Food addict**

1 a.m., City Island, the Bronx.

The night often ended at a restaurant on City Island – unless someone ordered in food at the club, Garcia said.

DePalma spent a lot of his nights at Pasta Per Voi in Port Chester, owned at the time by reputed associate Joseph Fornino. There, federal authorities said, he met with people like reputed Gambino underboss Anthony Megale and conducted more mob business.

And they ate.

Garcia, already a big guy, gained 80 pounds during the investigation.

What made it worse, he said, is that while other agents might drink to relieve stress, Garcia uses food. And being an undercover FBI agent in a Gambino crime crew does bring some stress.

"Instead of Johnny Walker," he said. "I go for the Entenmann's."

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**Caption:** Joaquin "Jack" Garcia, a native of Cuba, is an FBI agent who posed as an Italian mobster and infiltrated a Gambino crime family crew led by Gregory DePalma. Garcia's investigation led to the indictment of more than 30 members and associates of the Gambino family.

Submitted photo

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