

Family ties

ASCIOTI'S MARKET, A SOLVAY LANDMARK, CELEBRATES 100 YEARS IN BUSINESS

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Ascioti's Market in Solvay recently made a concession to the modern world. It added an ATM machine.

It still doesn't take credit cards. It's a cash- or check-only business.

Time seems to stand still at Ascioti's, a meat market best known for the meatballs and Italian sausage made on the premises. And why shouldn't it?

Ascioti's turns 100 this year. It was founded in 1914 by Antonio and Caterina Ascioti, Italian immigrants who came to Solvay by way of Philadelphia. The shop, still in its original location at 2239 Milton Ave., remains in the family.

Remarkably, after 100 years, it's only in the second generation. The owner and operator is Philomena Ascioti, the 92-year-old daughter of Antonio and Caterina.

With help from an extended family — including Philomena's sisters Frances Quattrone and Rose Spagnoletti (the last survivors of a family of 10 children) — the meat market defies the passing of time.

It's withstood the onslaught of big chain supermarkets, the expansion of the suburbs and the closing of major local industries, especially Solvay's own Allied Chemical Co.

"To have a business, especially in retail, in the same family, in the same place, for 100 years is pretty rare," said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association. "Those that survive have strong family ties, and succeeding generations that want to be a part of it. But 100 years and just two generations? That's really unusual."

How did Ascioti's manage to survive?

"It's a family business and we're a close family," said Quattrone, who started helping with the shop's books after retiring as a school principal. "Over the years, whenever the store needed help, it was 'Call one of the cousins.'"

Luckily, there are some 30 to 40 cousins.

"It's also the customers who keep coming, generation after generation," said Quattrone's daughter, Marilyn Stone.

"When you know the local butcher, you know you're going to get a good product," said Philomena Terranova, like Stone a member of the third generation. "Over the years, everybody who came in knew the butcher, knew the cashier, knew the store."

Like the store itself, the butchers came from a long line, one training the next. Antonio was the first, but Caterina "cut meat" too. Their sons Joseph, Demetrio and Louis also worked as butchers, as did their son-in-law Pete Vilasi, who managed the store for many years. He trained Joseph Cavallo, who only recently retired.

Of course, some things have changed over the years. When the Asciotis started the store, it was a full-service grocery with produce, bread, milk — everything an early 20th century family might need.

The transformation to a specialty market, offering meats and Italian foods, came mostly in response to pressure from bigger markets and chains.

"Pete Vilasi was really important, because he really knew the meat business," Stone said.

Today, the shop has a long meat counter along one side, with glass-enclosed display cases and



Louis Ascioti, one of the founders' 10 children, with the Ascioti delivery truck. (Provided photo)

helpful employees like Al Mitson to see that the customers get exactly what they want. You can get various cuts of beef, pork, veal, chicken and more, plus special cuts for braciolo, meatloaf and meatball mixes and sausage.

In the dry goods shelves in the center of the shop, you'll find evidence that Ascioti's also supports many other Central New York businesses. Among its offerings are bread from Di Lauro's Bakery in Syracuse, Polish specialties from Hapanowicz Bros. in New York Mills, and sauces from places like Arenas Eis House in Mexico, Canale's in Oswego, Joe's of Oneida and the Spicy Hot Tomato Oil from Pastabilities in Syracuse.

Grinding the meatballs and sausage today is the job of manager Marc Ascioti, grandson of the

founders and nephew of Philomena. He and his wife, Dawn, recently opened a separate, independent store, Ascioti's To Go, in Liverpool.

The exact details of the meatball mix are a family secret, but it includes ground chuck beef, cheese, water, salt and pepper, parsley, garlic, Italian bread and eggs.

The family lore is that the mix was first formulated by Caterina in answer to a request from the nuns at St. Cecilia's Church in Solvay. Later, the mix was duplicated for sale in the store.

Connors notes that the Syracuse area is fortunate to have some of these old-fashioned Mom and Pop shops still in business, like Di Lauro's and Columbus Bakery for bread, Lombardi's for Italian imports, and Liebs and Steigerwald's, another specialty meat market with stores on Grant Avenue and in Cicero. (Liebs and Steigerwald's is a relative newcomer, since it wasn't founded until 1936).

"These are the places that figured out how to weather the changes," Connor said. "They must be doing something right."

■ Recipe D-3



Al Mitson weighs meat at Ascioti's. The market is turning 100. (Michelle Gabel / mgabel@syracuse.com)

Classic. Italian. Meatballs.



Store founders Caterina and Antonio Ascioti with eight of their 10 children. (Provided photo)

Braciolo, a meaty Italian classic

Asked to offer some family recipes for this story, Marilyn Stone answered: "I called my cousin, my mom and my aunt for recipes ... but like most Italian cooks, they don't measure anything, they do a 'taste' test when cooking and add ingredients as needed.

Every time one of their recipes was suggested as a possibility, they said, "We can't do this one ... we don't know how much cheese (or parsley, or breadcrumbs, etc.) to tell people to use."

They did come up a simple recipe for Braciolo, a meaty dish that seems perfect for the family that runs a meat market.



Ascioti's is located at 2239 Milton Ave. in Solvay. It's best known for its meatballs and Italian sausages made on the premises. (Michelle Gabel / mgabel@syracuse.com)



Owner Philomena Ascioti, center, with sisters Rose Spagnoletti, left, and Frances Quattrone at Ascioti's. The family business defies the passing of time with help from extended family. (Michelle Gabel / mgabel@syracuse.com)