



The little Italian deli that GREW

BROTHERS TURN VINCENZO'S INTO A CULINARY POWERHOUSE

By Sara McLennan

Photography • Robert Wilson

ARTICHOKE CAPONATA. What's the first thing that comes to mind when you hear those words? If you are like so many people in this area, you answered Vincenzo's — the wildly successful Italian food store in Kitchener's Belmont Plaza. The divine artichoke and asiago cheese spread is their best-selling item, so popular that they mix 250 kilograms of it each week at their Gage Street warehouse.

Customers scoop it up to serve warm in a hollowed-out Italian loaf, spread on a sandwich or even use as a pizza base.

Vincenzo's is a thriving business; its 75 employees handle 7,000 transactions a week. But some of their long-time customers still tell stories about shopping at the small store on Bridgeport Road operated by Vincenzo and Rita Caccioppoli, whose sons, Carmine and Tony, now run the shop on Belmont. And if those customers were children at the time, they may still remember — and complain about — the strong smell of dried fish that greeted them on every visit.

For Carmine Caccioppoli, hearing about those personal experiences is the most rewarding aspect of his career. "I can't think of another store where people have such a strong connection," he says. Indeed, it's those human connections that may



Tony (left) and Carmine Caccioppoli offer a combination of good prices and varied selection they say is unbeatable.

explain the store's current success.

Carmine remembers hurrying home from high school football practice to work in the store, which occupied the living room of their house. The brothers say their parents never pushed them into the family busi-

ness, which is probably why they ultimately embraced it. Now the Caccioppoli boys work six days a week, from 7:30 a.m. to 9 p.m., taking turns breaking for a couple of hours around dinnertime to see their families. ►







Vincenzo's is a landmark in Kitchener's Belmont Plaza. In the spring of 2007, the store will move to larger quarters.

At left: Olives, cheeses — if customers ask for a special item, the Caccioppolis try to track it down. At upper left, Vincenzo's cashier Linda Mitsis checks out purchases for Ricardo Flamenco Steiner and his sons, Manolo, 6, and Nicolas, 4.

► One thing hasn't changed, though. Throughout the day, their mother calls several times to ask how things are going and to check on what her boys will be eating for dinner.

It's a busy life and they've worked hard to find a balance. Tony and Carmine, who live in Waterloo and Mannheim respectively, have young children and while they take an occasional holiday, they say there is virtually no quiet time at the store.

In fact, Christmas ordering starts in early spring. "At least this year there wasn't any snow on the ground when our first Christmas order was placed, which is usually the case," Carmine said. This year, they hired additional staff in August so they would be knowledgeable about all the products well in advance of the Christmas rush.

The Belmont location has just 3,500 square feet of actual retail space, and they use every nook and cranny of it. It has served them well, and has even become a local landmark. Real estate ads have been

known to feature Vincenzo's proximity as a selling point: "Charming home for sale ... only 5 minutes from Vincenzo's!"

"We've been reluctant to expand," Carmine says. "It can be scary tampering with something that works."

However, they'd been dreaming about more space and cautiously making expansion plans. Carmine is the self-proclaimed dreamer who has to convince the business-focused Tony, who then packages the idea and makes a business case for it.

The two complement each other in the same way their parents did. Carmine remembers the time his father decided to purchase a pasta machine. His mother thought the idea was crazy — she didn't relish making pasta for hundreds of people. Then there was the time they decided to go out on a limb and bring in a few non-Italian cheeses, like brie, chevre and cambozola. Now they produce 250 kilograms of dry and fresh pasta each week and sell 700 to 800 kinds of cheese.

But Tony and Carmine seem to be on the same page with their plan to close the Belmont location in the spring of 2007. That's when they'll consolidate their Belmont and Gage Street operations in a 17,500-square-foot space a few blocks away on the old Bauer warehouse property, which is being redeveloped as condos, retail and office space at King and Caroline streets in Waterloo. The new Vincenzo's will be about 12,000 square feet; the Caccioppolis plan to take in partners and have already talked to a local butcher and an organic produce company about possibly operating within the store or adjacent to it.

"It may sound like a large space, but give us a few years and it will be just as packed as the current store," Carmine promises, laughing. "The extra elbow room will allow us to bring in an even larger variety of products."

The Caccioppolis are always on the lookout for new items and a large bulletin board helps them keep track of things they are researching. They also read food and beverage publications to see what is trendy. But most ideas come directly from ►

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► customers, who see Vincenzo's as a source of hard-to-find or unusual culinary items. The first time someone asks about a product they make a note, by the second time, they are actively trying to locate the item and, chances are, the third time someone asks, it's already in the store.

While Carmine intends to expand some of their current features, bringing in more food from local restaurants and building on their successful sandwich bar, he also wants to make the store more interactive.

Vincenzo's already offers a number of services: the website is updated regularly with interesting tidbits, such as recipes suitable for their new icewine vinaigrette. Some customers are even encouraging them to publish a cookbook. In the meantime, if a customer needs help with a recipe, Carmine has been known to come to the rescue, popping into his office to find a solution.

They have a genuine interest in helping customers learn more about food. People who are put on hold when they call the store hear pre-recorded information on a variety of topics, such as smoked meats and olive oil. "I can't tell you how many times I've picked up the phone, only to be told to put the caller back on hold so they can continue listening," Carmine says.

The new location will allow them to bring in chefs for cooking demonstrations, and Carmine envisions themed events such as Italian film nights when customers could dine in a piazza-style seating area. And if the liquor law changes, don't be surprised to find Vincenzo's selling wine.

For now, they continue to deliver the best shopping experience they can. It's all about variety and value, they say. It's about consumer awareness and demand. One can buy a \$3 bottle of balsamic vinegar at Vincenzo's, or a \$45 bottle. And most of their customers recognize the difference in quality.

The brothers are confident no store beats the combination of prices and range of gourmet products. When pressed to name a competitor, Carmine replies with a grin, "Well, there may be one store in New York City that I'd consider a worthy rival." 