

MANZO BOYS CARRY ON FAMILY TRADITION WITH GRAND REOPENING OF ITALIAN GROCERY

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The Manzo boys may not have lived a life of luxury growing up in a modest home in the Southampton neighborhood. They did, however, soak in the intangible riches of being part of a close Italian family and a close Italian community.

And they ate extremely well.

Being the sons of the owners of an Italian grocery had its drawbacks, say Pete and Paul Manzo. Cracking olives for hours was one chore Paul would have liked to trade for running around the neighborhood with his friends. But the benefits were tantalizing indeed.

"We ate all the time," said Pete Manzo, who, with his older brother, took over Manzo's Importing Co. after their father, Pietro, died in May 1998.

The retail and wholesale company at Devonshire and Macklind avenues, sells a mixture of Italian and other ethnic staples, such as fresh bread and olives, and specialty items, including Armenian meats and Chianti bottles with twisted-glass necks rising five feet on the shelves. The neighborhood is south of Chippewa Street and between Hampton Avenue and Kingshighway.

After sporadically closing in the past year as it underwent renovations, Manzo's will hold a "grand re-opening" celebration from 3 to 8 p.m. Saturday. The event is part of the Macklind Avenue Improvement Block Party promoting the Southampton neighborhood business district.

Rick Bonasch, a neighborhood resident since 1993 and current secretary of the Southampton Neighborhood Association, says that there is great potential for Macklind to become an active pedestrian strip on the scale of Ivanhoe Avenue in the Lindenwood neighborhood or Demun Avenue in Clayton.

"Macklind can be a focal point and give the neighborhood an identity," said Bonasch.

Phil Klevorn, president of the 800-plus member association, says he and his wife moved to the neighborhood six years ago because of its "cohesion, strong housing stock and great parks." Klevorn, who intends to live his whole life in Southampton, hopes the block party will encourage residents to embrace Macklind as their neighborhood hub.

"We want to showcase the small commercial development on Macklind," he said. "Our neighborhood is counting on the success of this small commercial district."

Bonasch and Klevorn see Manzo's with its shiny new storefront as an anchor for a potential turnaround of the street.

Making a good life

The story behind the market is one of perseverance and familial devotion.

While Pietro Manzo courted his future wife, Brigida, in Sicily, he would tell her, "Someday we will make a good life for ourselves in America."

Pietro, who was born in Memphis and moved to Italy as a young child, made the trip alone to St. Louis, where an uncle had lived. He worked at a market for a few years and

saved enough to send for Brigida. The details are still fresh in Brigida's mind. The year was 1952, the passage fare was \$250, and the ship was The Saturnia. In their time apart, Pietro occasionally sent money to Brigida. After she arrived, times were hard. As Pietro looked for work, the bills mounted. Brigida realized that it was time to tell her husband a little secret. To his delight, she revealed a wad of cash that would tide them over. She had saved every dollar he had sent to her, suspecting, as she prepared to move to an unknown land, that the money might come in handy.

"When I first met him, I used to tell my family, 'I am going to marry that man; I am going to move to America, and we are going to own our own shop,'" she said. "You know what? Everything came true!"

In 1969, the Manzos were forced out of their Franklin Avenue space for the construction of a bus station. The family closed up shop and trucked their refrigeration units to their current location. The Southhampton neighborhood embraced the new grocery and helped it become a neighborhood fixture.

When the Manzos realized that their new neighborhood contained a strong Greek presence, they shipped in feta and Mizithra cheeses, Ouzos and Greek olives to meet the demand. Pietro knew several members of two Greek Orthodox churches and provided - and the store continues to provide - much of the food for their events and festivals.

Inside the neighborhood, the family befriended a Greek woman, Bessie Stratos, who owned a hair salon across the street from their shop. She and her husband, Bill, also owned Spiro's, a Greek restaurant. The couple connected the Manzos with the Greek community.

Both families supported each other; Manzo's sold at wholesale to the restaurant, and the Manzo children walked across the street to have their hair cut by Bessie Stratos.

Pietro guided the store through the years while the neighborhood changed. As the Greek population dwindled, other ethnic groups arrived. When Pietro died, Pete was faced with a decision: remain in the corporate world or help the family business move into the 20th century.

After struggling with the "hardest decision" he ever had to make, Pete decided to carry on the mantle of the family business.

"My mom worked very hard to keep this going," said Pete, who had earned a business degree and worked in telecommunications for three years leading up to his father's death. "I didn't want to see anything happen to the store."

Despite the sacrifices Pete has made, such as paying out of his own pocket for his health insurance, he is happy with his position at the store.

"The corporate world and small business are like night and day," he said. "There's a lot of satisfaction in owning a store and knowing the people we sell to. A lot of our customers have seen me and Paul grow up. The old-timers come in and say, 'I knew your dad when you were a baby.'"

The gathering place

The store today attracts a variety of natives and transplants from around the world. They get some spillover from Bosnian-owned Cafe Harry a few doors down.

One of their recent hires is a young Albanian woman, Vjollca Isufaj. As Albanian customers increasingly shop at Manzo's, Isufaj has added translating to her list of duties.

"(Isufaj) has been a real asset," said Paul Manzo. "With the Bosnians, though, we're still struggling along with a lot of sign language."

Lebanese customers come in for wheat and lavosh, or Lebanese bread.

The brothers plan to add more than 150 items starting Saturday, including an expanded beer line, flavored flatbreads and a variety of pesto and clam sauces.

But traditional items and recipes will continue to be the pillars of the market's edifice.

Manzo's also sells many prepared items, such as olivi cciacciati, or cracked olives. Their salsiccia, or Italian sausage, are handmade in small batches from a family recipe brought over from Sicily.

"People don't have time to cook anymore," said Pete Manzo, who shares store recipes from time to time, so as to spread the cooking traditions his parents instilled in him. "I worry that these traditions won't get passed on."

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