

A Family Store in Bensonhurst

Marina Melchionda (February 18, 2010)



Louis Coluccio, grandson and son of the founders of D. Coluccio & Sons Italian Specialty Store, tells us the charming story of this family business and the role it plays in promoting the Italian Culinary Tradition in Bensonhurst, an Italian-American neighborhood in Brooklyn. It's a Saturday morning and the costumers are buying all they need for the upcoming week. As we take a look at their carriages, we chat with some of them...

Stepping into [D. Coluccio & Sons Italian Specialty Store](#) [2], located right in the heart of Bensonhurst, Brooklyn, really makes you feel as if you're back in Italy. If this Italian-American neighborhood par excellence has been changing quite a bit during the last few years with the influx of Chinese, Korean, and Russian immigrants, Coluccio's still remains a point of reference for all of those who are fond of Italian food.



As we are constantly looking for charming Italian stories to recount our readers, we decide to spend an hour or so in the shop, and talk to the son and grandson of its founders, Louis Coluccio Jr.

A nice cup of Italian espresso at the back of the store, a long pleasant chat, and we learn a lot about the fascinating story of this family business.

Louis is an Italian-American young adult in his mid-20s that strikes us from the very first thing he tells us: "I went to school in Boston and got a degree in Marketing and International Business. Although I could find an "independent" job somewhere else, I decided to come back to my relatives here in Bensonhurst and take care of the family business. I grew up with it and in it, I spent my summers here... To me it just made sense. It fitted me and I am fully satisfied with my choice and with my life now. I could not conceive it far from here".

A young adult that feels so attached to the Italian value of family, tells also a lot about the kind of environment where he comes from. We just can't help to ask him more about the story of his family...

Where does your family come from?

All my relatives come from Calabria. My grandfather was a greengrocer back there, but he was looking for a different future for his family, new opportunities. When he came here at first, he found a potential market for Italian specialties. That's when he started importing products such as provolone, Calabrese olives, and finally opened the shop in 1964. This is our third location. Before we were between 59 st. and 13th Avenue, then next door, and then we finally moved here.

I am sure that the business has changed a lot from how it was at the beginning...

Of course, although we still strongly sell and promote "traditional products", we also adapted our offer to what has become popular especially among Americans. People are getting more and more educated on Italian food, and are willing to try new flavors and recipes. They follow food shows, research on internet, and come here with pretty much a clear idea of what they are looking for. If you think about it, years ago nobody knew what mortadella or panettone were; today, we sell the first every single day, and we simply seem not to have enough in stock of the second during the Christmas season!

We also have people who come here demanding for a product, but do not exactly have a clear idea on how to prepare it. As we are more than happy to give them recipes and advices, sometimes they also come back with something they have cooked and ask us to taste it to "check if it's the way it is supposed to be".

As a matter of fact, I saw many Americans walking around the shop...

We have all kinds of people coming over. They live in the neighborhood, but also far away. There are some who moved out to Jersey, Connecticut, and Long Island and when they are around visiting their families in the weekend, they still come here for their grocery shopping

And for you, how is it to work with your family every day?

It's fun! As in every other job, we have good moments and bad moments. But when it's good, it's great. There are a lot of us working here: there is me and my father, my aunt Kathy and my uncle Rocco, my cousin Sal that works in sales; and still others. Of course, we also have non-related employees, but they work here from so long that we consider them as part of the family.

What is your dearest memory related to the shop?

I remember when I was a kid and my grandpa was still around. After school I used to come here, and do my homework in the back shop. His strong but warm presence made of this place a second home for me. Everybody loved my grandfather, and we were all here to help him out during busy moments as the holiday season.

Sometimes you don't realize how precious some moments are until you lose them. Fortunately we did and do, as we still carry on his memory by taking the best care of the business he founded with



greatest sacrifices.

What do you do exactly in the shop?

I am mainly responsible for the retail sector, but I am also trying to transform the store in a meeting point between old and new generations here in Bensonhurst. I opened our Facebook page, and more and more young people are coming. For the first time, we will also host some "community events", both in and out of the store. I want Coluccio's to be not only a place where you can buy Italian products, but where you can also learn more about Italian culinary culture and tradition.

What is the next event coming up?

Famous Italian-American chef and writer Michele Scicolone will meet our costumers and visitors and sign copies of her new book "[The Italian Slow-Cooker](#) [3]" on March 6.

We will also sponsor a "All You Can Eat Pasta Dinner" at [Locanda Verde](#) [4] in Tribeca, Manhattan, on Feb. 22 and March 2. Chef [Andrew Carmellini](#) [5] will prepare his specialties using our tomatoes, oil of olive, and...pasta, of course...

As we finish our coffee, Louis leaves me for a bit to go to talk to some costumers. I take the opportunity to tour around...

Isles and isles of cookies, canned tomatoes, oil of olive, an unbelievable assortment of pasta of different shapes, manufacture, region of origins, taralli, and so forth: everything is Italian, from the first to the very last shelf.

On the right inside, at the back of the store, a huge fridge keeps mozzarella, ricotta, heavy cream, and fior di latte, just as fresh as they should be. As you let them fill your nose with their aroma, your eyes are captured by the "vision" of the counter, on which huge salamis, prosciuttos, and provolones, are hanged, waiting to be sliced and served to the gourmet costumer. Behind the counter's glasses, bowls and bowls of Italian olives of different varieties are divided by seasoning.

It's a Saturday morning, and families are buying all they need for the upcoming week. Carriages full of groceries run back and forth, long listes of items to buy, children asking for their favorite chocolates, moms happy to spoil them a bit. Many Italians, many Italian-Americans, but also many Americans come here to buy something they saw on a food magazine and "can't find in many other places", as Mary Ann, a young woman in her 30s, explains us. "I am curious about soppressata. I read an article about it a few days ago, and I am craving to taste it, it sounds so good!".

As we run into Concetta, a grandma accompanied by her daughter and grandson Thomas, we discover that some old Italian habits never ever die... "What am I looking for? Good Italian oil of olive. This little one eats over every single day at lunch, when his mother is at work... I prepare for him homemade bean soups, lentils, cutlets, ragù sauce...The child must grow up healthy and strong, I would never buy shoddy oil when I cook for him", she tells us mixing English and Italian words with a very strong Sicilian accent.

While we are talking, her old friend Maria comes by. A nice little, short lady, dressed in dark colors that brighten up her white shiny air. As many people in the neighborhood, she comes here almost every day: "Of course I can't buy bread for a week and throw it in the freezer. I stop by and get a nice loaf, and if something inspires me, I'll buy it for my son that comes to visit me every day". As it is evident from the very long chat she has with Concetta, she doesn't come at Coluccio's just for shopping, but also to meet her friends, and have some company for a bit.

We leave Coluccio's at 1 pm or so. With us, many others are going back home. In the Italian-American neighborhood lunch is still the main meal of the day. Families and kids are waiting for their piatto di pasta...

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