
MELTING POT

BY AMY ZAVATTO

D. COLUCCIO & SONS

Fifty years of importing Italy.



BOROUGH PARK—The first thing you notice when you walk into D. Coluccio & Sons—before your breath catches at the sight of the wall to your left, packed with pasta of every shape and twist, or, to the right, at the luscious, dangling links of dried sausage, or the boxes and jars and cans and packages filled with nearly every kind of Italian import you might desire neatly crowding the middle—is the pungent, perfect perfumes of provolone and Pecorino Romano. Like an olfactory compass, the aromas direct you to the bright and open case in the back, where the sources of this siren’s smell perch, along with cake upon cake of other myriad imported Italian cheeses.

It was upon Pecorino and provolone that Louis Coluccio Sr. and his father traded the hardships of post-WWII Reggio, Calabria and started a multi-generational family business that has stood the test of real estate trends, food fads, citywide blackouts, and changing neighborhood faces for 50 years.

“I was 17 years old. It was hard for me. I didn’t speak English,” Louis Sr. remembers, his voice still rising and falling with the lilting cadence of his Calabrese accent. “We worked hard, me and my father.”

His father was Dominic—the D. in the store’s name. It was he who, while working in construction, realized that if his family missed the flavors of home, their Borough Park neighbors probably did, too. “It was all Italian back then,” says Louis Sr. “Lots of Calabrese!”

So in 1958 the family opened a tiny storefront of beer and soda. By ’64, they’d moved to a bigger space a block up, adding cold cuts and groceries. Then, using his beer license as a portal into the old world, Dominic began importing the provolone whose aroma still permeates the store today, and olives, for which he created his own special brine. By 1980 they needed to move once more, another block up to 60th, just off 13th Avenue.

Today, the tiny-shop-that-could has become a goldmine of all Italian things edible—bags and boxes of pappardelle, garganelli, rotelli and schiaffoni; jars of chestnut, quince, and Sicilian orange preserves; multiple incarnations of baccalá; brightly colored candied almonds; golden bottles of olive oil; and hard-to-find Italian imports, like the Mulino Bianco cookies that Al di Là owner Emiliano Coppa grew up with and gives to his own child now. “My son is crazy for them,” he

Photographs: Erika Harvey

laughs. “I go there because I have a craving for Italian things, and it is really, really Italian. The panettone, the big jars of Nutella. The salami they make is *very* good, and the cold cuts, like speck—it’s very, very fresh and it’s from Italy.” Emiliano and his wife, Al di Là’s chef Anna Klinger, also use one of Coluccio’s pastas on their menu—a nearly impossible-to-find noodle called *paccheri* that they first tasted on a trip to Rome years ago and searched high and low for once they returned.

And now the shop has something else, something that would make Dominic puff on his trademark cigar with pride—the third generation of Coluccios at the helm.

“My grandfather was the guiding light; the direction,” says Louis Jr., who learned the ropes from the ground up and, at 25, has enthusiastically received the reigns, though coming back wasn’t always part of the plan. “It was never a conscious decision. I went

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to college, but my parents didn’t push the business on me,” he says. “My dad would say, ‘If you want to go to law school, I’ll pay for it. If you want to be a dentist, be a dentist! It’s up to you.’ But it was just a natural thing.” In December 2004, degree in hand, he came home, unpacked his dirty laundry, had a meal with the family, and the next morning went to work to help with the holiday rush. That, three years ago, was that.

After mastering the floor business and retail buying, Louis Jr. is learning the wholesale end from his uncle, who still counts all the stock in the store and their three warehouses by hand, trusting the brain more than machines. He’s hoping to go on a few buying trips to Italy, but for now is busy becoming a face that the old customers grow familiar with, as he becomes accustomed to theirs.

Like the other day—a woman came in to buy a can of beans, only to return a few minutes later after realizing she purchased the wrong item and needed to exchange it. “I asked her for a receipt,” Louis Jr. says. “She smiled, tilted her head, and squinted her eyes at me, clearly amused. She slapped my shoulder and said, ‘Boy, I have been shopping here since before you were born.’ I started laughing, and she proceeded with confidence to exchange her beans, without a receipt.”

“I just love the idea of Coluccio’s,” says Ed Levine, *New York Times* food and wine writer, and founder of *seriouseats.com*. “It’s an Italian supermarket plunked down in Brooklyn selling mostly





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high-quality Italian foods at a fair price. I love walking around the place, and I love taking people there. It's an only-in-New-York, or should I say only-in-Brooklyn, kind of place."

And yet, it seems that only-in-Brooklyn feel is something that's reaching far beyond 60th Street and 13th Avenue. "We ship all over the country now," says Louis Jr. Especially popular is the store's own label of San Marzano tomatoes, La Bella. "My family stuck to what they knew.

At that time, there was no dominant

brand of Italian items, so I guess my grandfather figured, rightfully, that if he created his own brand, it would work out. There was no Prego back then!"

But while the original notion for the business was necessity, the abundance that bursts from its shelves today speaks more to passion than practicality, something that is obvious in Louis Jr.'s love of all things edible and aromatic, a love that keeps him poring over culinary magazines and books, constantly trying new foods, always hungry for more.

"Food is such a part of our lives," he says. "I don't think there's anything else that can take two different people from two different backgrounds and get them to bond besides food—it's beautiful."

True enough; while back in the day, Coluccio's customers were mostly transplanted paesanos, today you're just as likely to hear a Russian, Hispanic, West Indian, or even Midwestern accent as you would Italian.

But the more things change, the more they stay the same.

"There is, at all times, a family member in the store. I think that's very, very rare to come by. I beg my father to take days off," Louis Jr. says, his pale green eyes exasperated but amused, "but he comes in anyway." The store is open six days a week and, Louis Sr., 66, works them all.

"I see my family all the time, not just for holiday meals or Sunday meals," says Louis Jr., packing a customer's bag. "I couldn't imagine it any other way. My grandfather always wanted everyone to be involved somehow, because he was so proud of it. And to be where we are now—it's just unbelievable. I feel like I'm part of something bigger, you know?" □

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