

Italian Canadian Foodways 0:07

So we'll begin with who the founder of your businesses and when it was founded, I believe was 1958, but...

Robert Galati 1:13

Nineteen...fifty...eight, four brothers. And the four brothers, my father's four brothers came together. And basically, [it was] a whole different life in those days.

Robert Galati 1:47

I'll give you back a little bit of background about the four brothers, but basically four brothers came together and they rented--they looked to open a supermarket. They looked in what's available in the Corriere Canadese, the daily newspaper--Italian newspaper because they had no English. And they found a store-or a storefront-for rent on Queen Street. 1116 Queen Street. And that was the four brothers, my dad and his three brothers. He was the first to arrive in Canada in 1954. And then he sponsored his other three brothers who came up via Argentina.

Italian Canadian Foodways 2:33

Oh, wow.

Robert Galati 2:35

Immigration in those days was not necessarily direct from Italy, but also coming back up from Argentina was easier. So they sponsor, they came here, they open up this little tiny 1200 square foot little supermarket with a crank cash register. And it started the history of Galati Brothers Supermarkets.

Italian Canadian Foodways 2:55

Wow. That's awesome.

Robert Galati 2:58

All the brothers took a part: one did the produce, one (my dad) was in the meat and deli, [one did] grocery and another one did delivery in those days.

Italian Canadian Foodways 3:10

What were their names?

Robert Galati 3:13

So the oldest was Antonio (my uncle), Francesco (my dad), Nicola and Stefano. All have now, are now ceased, except for my dad, who is 90. He's the only one left today.

Italian Canadian Foodways 3:34

Amazing, and he can see how the business has grown. That's, that's awesome.

Robert Galati 3:38

That's how they started. And then if we continue on the story, so basically, many years later, my uncle Nick, who had no kids, the oldest, and my uncle Stefano went back to Italy because the environment here, they couldn't adapt. So the cold weather, non-speaking Italian in those days, they can only speak Italian and so they went back to bed left my dad and my uncle and Tony here to move forward with the supermarket business. And my dad and uncle Tony, they push forward and they basically brought it to the larger scale and the kids, we all got involved.

Italian Canadian Foodways 4:24

So did you guys get involved right away like it wasn't as you grew up, you just you worked at the store,

Robert Galati 4:29

you work as you go up you work part time in the store and things like that, but you don't you don't foresee that you're gonna go into this little tiny store business over the years.

Robert Galati 4:39

So basically from that little tiny store on Queen and Dovercourt, they moved to a larger store because they moved with the immigration. So in those days, all the Italians lived around that, that [being] the Queen, Dovercourt, Ossington, up to College, they lived all in those areas. And then immigration, people moved. They kept going where-

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:13

To York [region]?

Robert Galati 5:14

They went to North York, York. So my dad and uncle then put up a store in North York, in Western Rd and Sheppard area. So that was their first venture into a large supermarket that had multiple cash registers. I guess. And at that point, we all (the five kids) from those two brothers started more into the business, more part-time [work]. We were getting older, I was at Ryerson, my cousin's [were at] Humber, Ryerson, so we were sort of spending a lot more time and we got involved at Bradstock and then store number two was Malton in the West, then anyway we got to six stores and basically that's how that all went. And then many, many years, well not many years ago, but many years later. 10 years ago today, the families grew apart as all family businesses [do]. Yeah, grew apart and we sort of split it up and one group took a few stores, another group, that's where we are today. Except the one group is no longer around and our group, with my sister, we have just the one store. We were up to four stores, our group, and then we decided just to keep with one store as we got older, [with] no kids, no nobody in the business. That's what happened. We're you down to one store now.

Italian Canadian Foodways 6:51

Okay. What region of Italy are you from?

Robert Galati 6:57

Calabrese, Catanzaro. Old town called San Nicola da Crissa

Italian Canadian Foodways 7:03

Okay, I haven't heard of that.

Robert Galati 7:05

Which is outside of Vibo Valentia.

Robert Galati 7:27

Yeah, so my dad my mom actually sponsored my dad when they immigrated in 1954. My mom came in 1952. She had this boyfriend in 1954, called him up (in those days) and he came on by boat and crossed the waters like so many other immigrants. To Pier 21 [and then] got on the train. And then my mom was waiting for him here in Toronto.

Italian Canadian Foodways 8:41

That's nice. Do you know why your dad and his brothers chose the food industry? Like why they decided a supermarket was their direction?

Robert Galati 8:55

In those days, if you think way back of the 50s, it wasn't a supermarket, it was a general store. My grandfather had a general store.

Robert Galati 9:05

If I'm more realistic, I'm third generation in this business.

Robert Galati 9:08

But yeah, my grandfather back in Italy had a general store. And I guess my dad, I don't know, so just...you can almost see it's in their blood, in my blood. That's why they chose--my dad actually trained in a small town outside of his, for sculpture carpentry.

Italian Canadian Foodways 9:33

Yeah, a lot of my family did trades like bricklaying and [whatnot].

Robert Galati 9:37

Trade came here, but [he] couldn't make much of the trade. And that's when you went into the supermarket business.

Italian Canadian Foodways 9:45

Wow. Did [the supermarket] have maybe an original mission statement or vision and has that changed from that point till now?

Robert Galati 9:56

You have to think, it [was the] 1950s, it was a matter of survival. It's a matter of making money with people.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:04

Yeah, that's fair.

Robert Galati 10:07

We would get [our] groceries at the end of the week, depending on what was left in the grocery store with all the brothers, [the] four brothers, and that's what we would eat.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:16

Yeah, make something out of it.

Robert Galati 10:18

One week could have been rapini from produce, another week could have been beans.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:24

Was it originally, like when it first started, very specific to just Italian specialty foods?

Robert Galati 10:36

Especially Southern Calabrese Italians, because they sort of reached out in their community. [Different regional Italians went to different stores] because I think they had their own store.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:52

Okay, I'm kind of getting more of a grasp of that time now, I guess it was all about word of mouth. Is that how it worked?

Robert Galati 11:07

So in those days, the services that were important. There [were] a few services. One is, for instance, there was a black book for what they owed. So when they got paid at the end of the month, a lot of wives, even in those days, a lot of wives worked. They got paid at the end of the month by cheque. They come to the store and we would cash that check against their groceries.

Italian Canadian Foodways 11:36
Oh, that's interesting.

Robert Galati 11:38
But everybody did in those days, we were almost like a bank. So and we would carry the receivable for about a month.

Italian Canadian Foodways 11:48
Oh, wow.

Robert Galati 11:50
In those days, it wasn't easy to go out and open a bank account. Everybody thinks in today's world, "Oh, [I'll go] Saturday", they just didn't do these things. Language was probably the biggest fear and language probably the biggest hurdle. A couple of the other services, we would pick them up from home and take them back home with the groceries, in either the small cubicle van or a station wagon.

Italian Canadian Foodways 12:19
Oh, that's really nice. That's very community-esque.

Robert Galati 12:22
These are the services in those days you have to do if you want [business].

Italian Canadian Foodways 12:29
And so your current location now, like the store that you still have, that's obviously not the one on Queen Street but in North York, right?

Robert Galati 12:37
Yeah.

Italian Canadian Foodways 12:37
Okay, that's what I thought, because that would be way too small.

Robert Galati 12:41
Okay, now we've evolved where the so-called Italian supermarket almost doesn't really exist now. To be "in-fashion." So whether you go to a Fortino's or whether you go to a Longo's, it may have some Italian influence in it. But you'll see sushi.

Italian Canadian Foodways 13:02
Yeah, it's a grocery store now. It's everything.

Robert Galati 13:05
We have a sushi maker in the store.

Italian Canadian Foodways 13:08
I'm very excited. I've interviewed a lot of places, and I can't wait to go to your places when it's open.

Robert Galati 13:16
We have a chef, with assistants. A bakery as well. These are very evolved. Where now, the thing that hasn't changed, is that we still pay attention to our community. Whatever it is in this area, for instance, this area, there is very few Italians, almost zero. We have a few Jewish, a lot of Asians. So whatever, Persians, Middle Eastern community we have, so we've tried to make it more of a modern store. We have different things going on.

Italian Canadian Foodways 13:59

Yeah, kind of like a middle ground. I don't know, I love backstories, [they] always make me feel very warm. And I really like your story.

Italian Canadian Foodways 14:10

How is the pandemic changed the way your business operates?

Robert Galati 14:20

S, the pandemic for us has gotten--we've gotten busier obviously. Taking away--the business away--from the restaurants and takeouts. They're the ones that have suffered the most. So, people are still eating three meals a day. So we have gained that business. Now people are working from home. So Tim Hortons, Starbucks has lost a lot of business. Yeah. We sell coffee, you know, the already made pots? Yeah. All that kind of stuff. We've never sold so much.

Italian Canadian Foodways 14:59

What is, so you would say even those like, like the chef that you have that does those things and like your sushi maker, are those parts busier?

Robert Galati 15:08

Just starting to come back, believe it or not. Anything with that sort of service, like slicing. People had lost some confidence in that during COVID (the first eight months of COVID). And then it's like the kitchen, people were cooking their own food, our food. They weren't buying any sushi. So people were very cautious about health and safety, fanciness and they would have rather cook their own meals.

Italian Canadian Foodways 15:42

Yeah. Okay, that's, I guess it makes sense. We were all also unsure.

Robert Galati 15:49

Yeah, and it's coming back now.

Italian Canadian Foodways 15:50

Yeah, and that gets me excited.

Robert Galati 15:53

Like I said, so if you look at the meat, you know, you call it meat and potato. That's exactly what we were selling. A lot of chicken, a lot of meat, and a lot of fruit and vegetable.

Italian Canadian Foodways 16:03

Yeah, which is interesting. What would you say your best selling department is?

Robert Galati 16:10

All the fresh departments is what we do. We can't sell, well we can, "selling Tide," as my daughter's say, "is for the e-commerce business." You pick up your phone, the computer, you order, you get it delivered within a day. That's what's taken the grocery business. Because Tide is Tide, Maxwell House is Maxwell House, you know, you're only interested in getting those products. If you go out to find a half decent steak on e-commerce, it's not going to happen.

Robert Galati 16:24

You need to be [at Galati].

Robert Galati 16:41

You need to go to your local butcher shop or your local grocery little store and get these fresh items.

Italian Canadian Foodways 16:55

Yeah, that's honestly what I miss the most. Pre-pandemic, [I loved] going to those little mom-and-pop shops. [But it] eliminated pretty much all, as I only felt like I could only go out once a day or once a week. And so it would just be somewhere I could get everything. And I can't wait to rediscover those places. If they're still open.

Robert Galati 17:18

Again. In our areas, the kids went back home. All the downtown, all the university, they all went back home. And 1) they got no money and parents are gonna feed them. So I saw especially where we are up because we're out in the suburbs, a lot of that was going on. Now, there's no school over for a year.

Italian Canadian Foodways 17:50

True. So maybe [it will be] a September thing.

Robert Galati 17:53

Downtown is still dead. So I don't know, I'm hoping that by September when you guys go back to your universities, everything should start to be getting back to normal.

Italian Canadian Foodways 18:05

Fingers crossed.

Italian Canadian Foodways 18:07

Okay, this is our last question. What is the future for your business?

Robert Galati 18:16

Well, you know, it's myself, and my sister is probably the same. We have no kids involved in this business.

Italian Canadian Foodways 18:23

Okay, and what's your sister's name?

Robert Galati 18:25

My sister's name is Grace.

Italian Canadian Foodways 18:26

Awesome. Thanks.

Robert Galati 18:28

So we have no kids involved in the business. So probably what will happen at some point, we'll sell the business, because, you know, there's some equity there. But I've got two daughters. And Grace has got three kids. None of them, you know, this is not--this is a hard seven day, six/seven day business. Not easy.

Italian Canadian Foodways 18:52

It's different from when you were a kid, I guess. And your parents needed you to work there just because it was extra hands versus--

Robert Galati 19:00

Extra hands, extra money, whatever way you want to look at it.

Italian Canadian Foodways 19:02

Yeah. So that's crazy [how] just one generation later, how different it is.

Robert Galati 19:08

That's just a changing world. It didn't happen that way one, two generations ago. With everybody into the family business, whether you were a male, whether you're female, didn't matter. Now, if you stay in school, you have a lot of options.

Italian Canadian Foodways 19:24

Yeah, paving your own ways via the schools. Well, that was awesome. Thank you so much again, I really appreciate it.

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>