

Italian Canadian Foodways 0:02

Thank you so much for meeting with me today, obviously over the phone. I would love to explain the project to you a bit before we begin if that's okay with you.

Tony Ferlisi 0:12

Yeah, sure.

Italian Canadian Foodways 0:14

Awesome. So I'm currently an undergraduate student at the University of Toronto. And basically, with the Italian department, we're currently looking at Italian-Canadian foodways over the last ~100 years in Ontario, and how that shaped food as a whole, as an industry in the Greater Toronto and Hamilton area. And so we're specifically looking or myself and a few others are specifically looking at grocery stores, delis, bakeries, and obviously, O. Ferlisi Supermarkets was integral at that time (when you were open). So I really, really appreciate you sitting down with me today. Obviously, if you can answer as much as you can, to your knowledge that would be amazing. But it's all pretty much just about your business from the beginning.

Susie Ferlisi 1:02

Sure, sure, our pleasure. Is there a professor that's overlooking any of your work or all of your work or is this all independent with you and your colleagues, Kate?

Italian Canadian Foodways 1:12

So no, so right now we're working under Dr. Teresa Lobalsamo, she's the chair of Italian Studies at the University. Mm hmm.

Susie Ferlisi 1:24

Okay

Italian Canadian Foodways 1:25

Yeah. Awesome. So I'm going to start with who is the founder of your business, and when was it founded?

Susie Ferlisi 1:35

That would be our dad, Onofrio Ferlisi.

Italian Canadian Foodways 1:39

Okay.

Susie Ferlisi 1:40

And it would have been founded in 1957.

Italian Canadian Foodways 1:50

That's awesome. So obviously, he was Italian. What specific region in Italy was he from?

Susie Ferlisi 2:01

So my dad's family was from a small town called Casteltermini. [The province of] Agrigento; it's Sicily.

Italian Canadian Foodways 2:12

Awesome. Okay, perfect. And I've spoken to other grocers of like the mid 1900s, and they say that a lot of them had this delivery service or had at that time, where they would drive people to their grocery store just to shop. Do you know if that was ever something that happened at the beginning?

Tony Ferlisi 2:33
Absolutely.

Susie Ferlisi 2:35
Oh, yeah.

Italian Canadian Foodways 2:39
Do you know why your dad chose the food industry?

Susie Ferlisi 2:43
You know what, it's what he and my mom knew back home. So originally, back in the hometown, they had a small boutique, in the piazza, where they sold fruits, vegetables, salumi, and it got actually along with his brothers, when they travel around the country, and they purchase food and prizes, and obviously would furnish his own boutique in the hometown and also furnish other boutiques across the island.

Italian Canadian Foodways 3:21
Okay.

Susie Ferlisi 3:22
So basically [this is] what they did for a living back home.

Italian Canadian Foodways 3:29
Do you know if they had an original mission statement or vision for their grocery store?

Susie Ferlisi 3:36
Sure, sure. So basically, you know, what, just like anybody that comes from another country is to make sure you create a good life for yourself and for your family, obviously, right? But in doing that, as well, yes, you need to make sure that whatever business or whatever you're putting forth is going to, is geared towards a market that you know, and, you know well, so along with making sure that they provided for their family, they wanted to make sure that the business that they have opened had a back home, small town, feel, right? They understood that there was a market, there was a niche in the area, and they wanted to make sure that what they did was propagated that family life environment, right. I mean, they spoke Italian, you know, so people can come in and they're their native language was used, obviously, right? Yeah.

Italian Canadian Foodways 4:39
Like a little piece of Italy.

Susie Ferlisi 4:41
Absolutely. You know, the food staples, celebrate the cultures, they knew what they needed to continue their traditions and cultures in the new land.

Italian Canadian Foodways 4:53
And did you folks work there as children?

Susie Ferlisi 4:57
Oh, yeah.

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:00
So was it your father's choice to close the business? Was it just timing? Or?

Susie Ferlisi 5:08

It was timing. You know, you're talking about the '90s and recession and timing was very off. And it was just the best thing overall to do at the time, right?

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:17

Yeah, of course. I know my family, when I told them I had an interview with you guys she was like, "Oh my gosh, I remember going there!"

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:17

Do they remember which store they shopped at?

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:31

I couldn't tell you off the top of my head, but I'm sure they would know.

Susie Ferlisi 5:36

Okay...

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:37

Next time, I will message you and let you know.

Italian Canadian Foodways 5:41

Okay, so did your stores have a best selling item or an item that maybe your father was most proud of?

Susie Ferlisi 5:53

I don't know, Tony. I mean, we sold all of the ethnic stuff we imported. What what was special about, was there anything in particular that people came to the store for that they liked? That they thought about?

Tony Ferlisi 6:08

We would provide [customers] with like a sausage, a homemade sausage. We [made] a homemade prosciutto.

Italian Canadian Foodways 6:34

So obviously it was a full supermarket. That's pretty much all of the questions I have. So I'm just wondering if you guys have any anecdotes or things you might want to share to be transcribed for the archives.

Susie Ferlisi 6:49

I think that's really important to know, not just for O. Ferlisi Supermarkets, but a lot of them share the same ways to do business, you know? And like, in our case, for instance, right? When we first started, I mean, we had a delivery truck, remember we had a space, a little white space to live in. And a lot of these people were immigrants, right, and they were expecting family. The airport seemed to be like, you know, 100 miles away. And I remember my family very, very often would go to the airport with a family member to pick up their family members and bring them to Toronto. They had no transportation, right. You know, the delivery service. You know, it's, and it's not like you have, you know, the [typical] life story. I remember when they used to deliver the groceries, they bring up right into the kitchen for them.

Italian Canadian Foodways 7:53

Wow!

Susie Ferlisi 7:53

You know, you had two three story homes, they go up to the [homes] and bring them right up. You know, always to maintain that relationship with all of these customers. What else? And it was really important as well in Europe, I think one of the things that really helped the Italian community was the way that he says, "I could take a piece of Italy" and bring it with them. You know that's so important type of cibo (in Italian, meaning food) is so important. I mean, you know, the first salmon, the rapini, the artichoke, you know, sheets for Easter--

Italian Canadian Foodways 8:43

Oh for sure, yeah. Just to have a place where you can find products that remind you of home too...

Susie Ferlisi 8:49

Absolutely, absolutely. And, you know, you mentioned in one of the last questions that you had, right? You said, "what do you think the contribution of these businesses are?"

Italian Canadian Foodways 9:04

Yeah!

Susie Ferlisi 9:05

I think that, I mean, anything Italian (the "Italian brand") is world renowned now, right? Over the years, you see it just developing and developing. I mean, everybody's in distress though, everybody, you know, has the lattes and the cappuccinos, you know, people will buy the tomato passatas as opposed to the prepared tomato sauces in jars (like Heinz for instance), or whatever, right? All of the ethnic spices: the basil, the oregano, right, like this is so huge. I mean, Lavazza, all of that stuff. But I think what is done is really opened up an appreciation on the part (I'm just speaking for Canada, Ontario, even) an appreciation of the "Italian brand" and--I'm not sure where your studies have taken you, Kate--but you're familiar with Fortino Supermarkets? You may be probably aware they were originally in Hamilton--

Tony Ferlisi 10:12

--yes they were--

Susie Ferlisi 10:13

--and Loblaws bought them.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:16

Yeah, and I heard that Sobey's just bought out Longo's.

Susie Ferlisi 10:20

Correct. But I think that's a testament to the "Italian brand" in the market that there is and Toronto and Southern Ontario for "the Italian brand." And all of us little guys that started in the '50s and then grew just help propagate, I think, this "Italian brand."

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:41

Yes. And staying true to that even like as the years went on...

Susie Ferlisi 10:45

Absolutely, for sure. For sure.

Italian Canadian Foodways 10:49

No, that's a great point. That just made me think about so many different things. Well, that's awesome. Thank you--

Transcribed by <https://otter.ai>