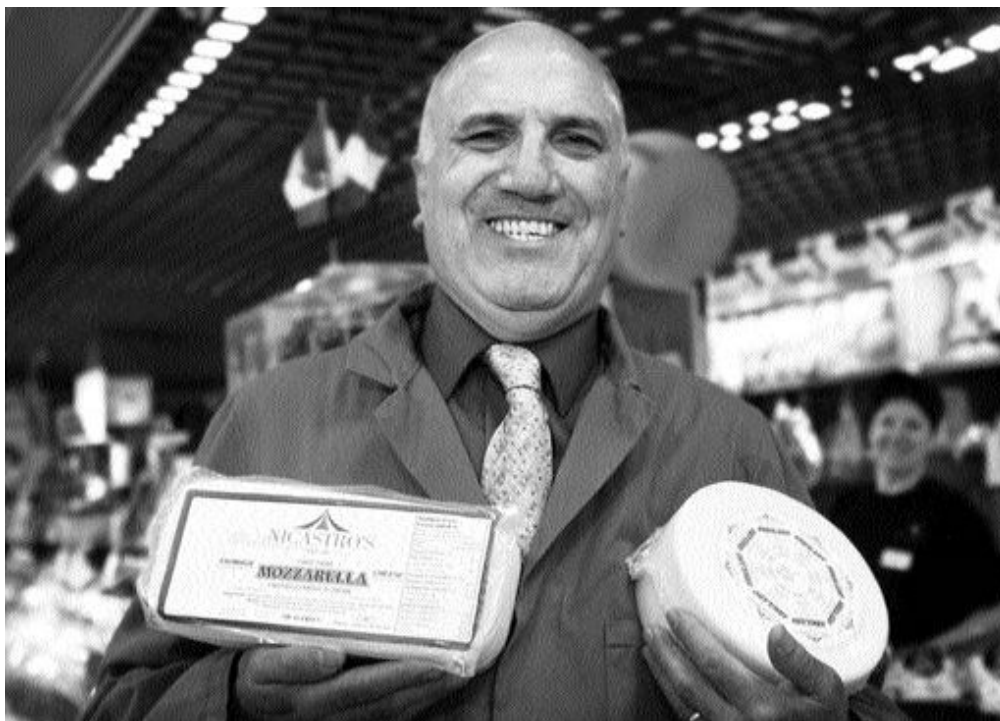


La deli vita

Speciality food shop owner Joe Nicastro has been named Italian Person of the Year for his fundraising efforts

BY TONY LOFARO, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN JUNE 12, 2009



Joe Nicastro of the Italian food store Nicastro is being honoured tonight as the Italian Person of the Year. 'He does an enormous amount of community work,' says Tony Mariani. 'Joe has always been there for these groups.'

Photograph by: Bruno Schlumberger, The Ottawa Citizen, The Ottawa Citizen

Joe Nicastro has seen it all during 37 years of running one of the busiest Italian delis in Ottawa.

In 1972, he and his four brothers opened their first store on Gladstone Avenue to serve mostly Italian customers living in the Preston Street area and near St. Anthony's Church on Booth Street. As Ottawa's Italian community grew and moved to Carleton Heights and other neighbourhoods, a larger deli was opened on Merivale Road in 1977.

The store cornered the market on Italian specialty foods, with the aroma of cheeses, salami and fresh bread wafting through the aisles.

Still, it wasn't always la dolce vita for the Nicastro family business, which includes brothers Joe, Rocco, Franco, Ugo and Sam. A family difference led Ugo and Sam to split off and open other stores with their sons.

But business at the Merivale Road store was always constant, even though competition came from Loblaws, Costco and later, Farm Boy.

As the food trend swung to more prepared meals, the store adapted and began to offer take-home dinners. But the specialty foods, including the many varieties of cheeses, pasta and olive oil are staples in the store. So is the smiling face and warm salutations from Joe Nicastro who greets longtime customers and newcomers.

"I still give the owner's touch, I think that's the secret to staying in business for so long," says Nicastro, 60, sitting in the store sipping an espresso. "I must be doing something right to survive the competition, especially here on Merivale Road."

Tonight, he's being recognized for his contribution to the Italian community through his fundraising efforts with Villa Marconi nursing home and St. Anthony's Church. He is receiving the Italian Person of the Year Award at the opening dinner of Italian Week being held at the Centurion Hall.

He is the second recipient of the award after Ottawa businessman Luigi Mion of Central Precast, last year's winner.

"I was a carpenter before," says Nicastro, adding that there was a need for an Italian speciality store and that was the reason his brothers opened their first shop.

"We started with serving the first-generation Italians, then second-generation and so on."

Nicastro says the store is mostly a family-run business; his wife, Rosina, sometimes works the cash and his son-in-law Franco also helps out. He has a staff of 34 full- and part-time workers, some of whom have been with him for more than 15 years.

"I still put in about 60 hours a week," he reports, adding his busy work schedule in the past prevented him from attending school and sports activities of his children.

He says his charity work is important and he always gives of his time no matter what the cause or how busy he gets at the store. "The community has helped us and I like to help the community back," he says.

He says the store will continue to adapt to the changing times, and adds he's looking at expanding to other locations in the city. He admits that the Internet has changed the shopping habits of many people, but he doesn't worry about the demise of the Italian specialty store.

"You can't buy (on the Internet) fresh prosciutto, or buffalo mozzarella or balsamic vinegar," he says.

Tony Mariani, vice-president of the Italian Week committee, said the community nominated four people for this year's award and board members chose the winner.

"Joe is a well-rounded good community guy," said Mariani, an Ottawa businessman. "He does an enormous amount of community work, and he's always giving free food to fundraisers. Joe has always been there for these groups.

"He doesn't have a high-profile and he doesn't belong to all these (Italian) associations, but he just gets the work done."

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