

The Prince of Grand Street

Michael Anstendig (September 24, 2007)



The small store is abuzz with activity. Two phones ring non-stop, the cash register clangs, four employees cut, slice and wrap orders of cheese and cured meats and customers are lined up nearly out the door, because four employees called in sick. Yet despite the apparent chaos, owner Lou DiPalo is unruffled, even serene. He looks tenderly at an elderly customer across the counter and in a hush voice assures, "Call me Friday. Tomorrow I'm making..."

...Scarmozza cheese. It needs one day to dry. It will be soft. Just the way you like it."

In a city based on ruthless and increasingly faceless efficiency, DiPalo's Fine Food Inc., located on



206 Grand Street in Manhattan, is a stubborn holdout where personal relationships trump modern business imperatives. The narrow, 1,200-square-foot store teems with 300 varieties of Italian cheese, some in refrigerated cases, others, like aged mozzarella and enormous yellow-beige columns of provolone, hang from the tin ceiling, interspersed among the glistening cured salamis.

The store's aroma is sweet, nutty and slightly pungent, given that the cheeses and meats are fermented products. In addition, its shelves brim with hundreds of artisanal packaged products – olive oils, olives, wood oven-baked breads, prepared sauces, fresh and dried pastas, fruit preserves, legumes and even obscure baking supplies like sheets of unflavored gelatin used for desserts like panna cotta.

Each product has been personally selected by Mr. DiPalo during his quarterly buying trips to Italy where he meets the producers or through relationships with culinary craftsmen here in the U.S., like the Sullivan Street Bakery.

Mr. DiPalo's dedication to his products is only matched by his devotion to his customers. Not surprisingly, he knows what they like. Astonishingly, he can recount the preferences of their parents, even grandparents. Mr. DiPalo's indispensable delicacies are present at many of the milestones of his customers' lives – christenings, confirmations, marriages and countless family feasts and gatherings.

It has been said that Bill Clinton had the ability to make each person he spoke with feel like they were the center of the universe. Mr. DiPalo has this ability, as do his siblings and co-owners, Maria and Sal, as did their predecessors.

Some patrons have been shopping at this fourth generation Little Italy specialty food shop for 60 years. They know that Mr. DiPalo will give them as much time as they need and will leisurely converse with them in English or Italian (or a combination of the two). Of course, spending 15 or 20 minutes with each customer defeats the notion of fast service, but customers don't seem to mind.

"You have to wait. Sometimes it's annoying. I always tell everybody, 'If you feel good when you come in, I promise you're going to feel better when you leave,'" says DiPalo. Clearly, his customers agree, with lines at the store often lasting two hours with nary a peep of protest.

"Every person he treats the same," beams Leslie Plotkin, a retired New York City school teacher who makes a special Mr. DiPalo run every week from the Upper West Side. "You can be Mario [Batali] or a regular person, he takes time with all of his customers. He doesn't short-change anyone. He takes customer service to a whole new level. And of course, he's charming." She bought a half-pound of pecorino cheese for a pasta carbonara she was planning, as well as some Parmigiano-Reggiano for snacking.

Sharing knowledge is the foundation of Mr. DiPalo's credo. "I have to know everything about what I sell. I have to know the person who made it, where it comes from, the history of it. Then, I have to tell my customers. If I just sell it to you, it's not enough. You're not going to enjoy it unless you really understand it."

The store, which was founded by Mr. DiPalo's grandparents, Concetta and Luigi, in 1925, originally only stocked items from the family's home region of Basilicata and neighboring Campania, Calabria and Puglia. Mr. DiPalo decided to expand to all of Italy. "We went into the direction of becoming a true Italian gastronomia. The ones in Italy concentrate on their own region. I take pride in having all the regions covered."

The store is open seven days a week and he supervises the on-premise handcrafting fresh mozzarella and ricotta cheeses for his retail and restaurant clientele. Mr. DiPalo's workday begins at 4:30 a.m. daily and extends into the evening when the store is washed down and the slicers are disassembled and sanitized.

While not overtly muscular, the 53-year-old with wiry salt and pepper hair and droopy eyelids atop sad brown eyes is unphased by hoisting an 85-pound wheel of Parmigiano-Reggiano on to the



counter and wedging it in half with a small, spade-shaped knife. He's dressed for serious labor – sneakers, jeans and a DiPalo polo shirt that's bears the logo of a smiling cow, with both head and tail held high.

"You see the golden color," says Mr. DiPalo, pointing to the interior of the half wheel. "This one here was made in the fall; it's the second growth of summer grass, it's the time of year that the cows give the richest milk and it's the time of year when the cows are most comfortable." He contrasts it with a winter version of the cheese. "[During] the wintertime, they're no longer feeding on grass, they feed on alfalfa and hay. It makes for a very sweet cheese."

Mr. DiPalo cuts wafer-thin pieces of the summer cheese and dispenses them, like a priest at communion, to every customer within his arm's reach. The grainy cheese dissolves on their tongues in an explosion of saltiness and mellow richness.

One customer expresses a preference for the fall cheese that was previously sampled. "One isn't better than the other," Mr. DiPalo notes. "You're going to have seasonal change; the cycles of the cow, the feed, will give you a different taste. That's what makes these cheeses so special."

A few minutes later, Mr. DiPalo slices up some speck, a specialty smoked prosciutto from Alto Adige, which he recently began carrying. "It combines the Northern European preservation method, smoking, with the Mediterranean method of salting and air drying meat," he explains, while handing out tissue-thin slices to spellbound customers.

Mr. DiPalo grew up in Bensonhurst, Brooklyn and always worked in the family store. He chose to attend Baruch College because it was a mere 10-minute subway ride to Little Italy where he could help set up the store and break it down late in the evening.

After graduating with a B.B.A. in Marketing, he flirted for three-years with a promising real estate career, yet always remained intimately involved with the store. Ultimately, its pull was irresistible and a perhaps more lucrative career was shelved. He is pleased with his decision. "I smile every day," DiPalo notes.

"We still consider this to be our grandparents' store. We don't consider ourselves owners and proprietors, but merely as caretakers to a traditional family business," said Mr. DiPalo.

Mr. DiPalo understands the enormous responsibility that his store confers. "We are part of peoples' upbringings. We are a link to their heritage, to their families. We invoke fond memories," he observes. He recounts how a customer gently wept after sampling a cheese that evoked the scent of her long-parted grandmother's kitchen. "This store means a lot more than the food."

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