

The Evolution of the Italian Grocery Store: From Ma and Pa to Mega Stores and Elite Grocers

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Abstract: In the Italian immigrant community that established itself first in the late 19th century and grew vastly larger in the wave of post WW2 immigration to Canada, the church took care of the spiritual needs, while the neighborhood Italian grocery store looked after their physical needs for sustenance. As the Italian community integrated into the fabric of Canadian society the nature of the Italian grocery store changed from neighbourhood store, to supermarket to suburban mega store and boutique merchant of cherished specialty brands.

Keywords: Italian, Italian-Canadian, grocery store, immigration, Canada, Toronto, College St., St. Clair Ave. W., Longo, Fortino, Pusateri, pasta, Italian food, olive oil, spaghetti, supermarket

Introduction

When the Italians that arrived as immigrants to Canada settled into their new country beginning in the late 19th century, the Roman Catholic Church took care of the spiritual needs of the soul, keeping up the strength of the spirit; while the neighbourhood Italian grocery store took care of the physical needs for food, nutrition to keep the body strong for back-breaking manual labour jobs, for cultural solidarity and the continuation of their culture identity.

The purpose of my research in tandem with Jim Zuccherò's "On the Legacy and Cultural Significance of Italian Grocers in Ontario" on the Italian grocery store is to examine the evolution of the Italian community in Ontario and perhaps draw comparisons to how they evolved in Italian communities across Canada. We will look at how they evolved just as the Italian immigrants evolved into Canadian citizens, and major participants in the life of Canada. Jim Zuccherò and I believe it is important to study the evolution of the Italian Grocery store, and how it changed over time to reflect the changing status of Italian-Canadians in their adopted homeland and for subsequent generations.

The neighbourhood Italian grocer provided the sustenance for the body. Some might argue that the neighbourhood grocery store was more than just a sustainer of the body. It also helped to maintain the Italian cultural identity. The evolution of the Italian grocery store over the 19th, 20th, and 21st century reflects the changes in both the status of the Italian community in Canada, the main stream culture's attitude to the Italian community, and the Italian community's view of mainstream Canadian culture.

Early Period

In the early period of Italian settlement in Canada, the neighbourhood grocery store was a place where people gathered on pay day or on the weekend to buy their food, but also to run into people from back home—their *paisan*.

Cultural identity was promoted by the establishment of neighbourhood Italian grocery stores. They became a visible geographic marker outlining the extent of Italian-Canadian neighbourhoods. If there was an Italian grocery store in the area there was an Italian community nearby. Many stores were named after families (Longo, Pusateri, Galati, Zuccherro, Gasparro,) and family names quickly served as markers for Italian-Canadian cultural identity. Some stores were also named after a town or region back in Italy (Calabrese, Nicastro, Catanzaro, Delia, Termini, Macelleria Venezia) and this solidified communal ties for many Italian immigrants who may have felt a sense of displacement in a strange land thousands of kilometres away from their homeland.

Italian-Canadian grocery stores also played a strong economic role in the Italian-Canadian community. They served as banks and loans providers, gave credit if the shopper was out of work, or if there were major expenses like illness in the family—kind of like a mutual aid society.

The Origins of Our Interest

Jim Zuccherro is the son of a man who owned Zuccherro's Fruit Market on Vaughan Road and Bathurst Street in Toronto until the late 1970s. I was the reluctant shopper of a mother, Emma Giorno, who dragged me and my sister to many Italian grocery stores, including Zuccherro's in the 1960s and 1970s.

Jim and I began discussing our experiences with Italian-Canadian grocery stores in the mid-2000s. In 2010, Jim and I spent time together

at the AICW Conference in Atri, Abruzzo. We discussed the topic and developed a mutual interest in what we saw initially as the disappearance of the neighbourhood Italian-Canadian grocery store. We agreed that we must do something to record and capture this development and preserve it for future Italian-Canadians as a moment in our heritage that might be lost if we did not write about it.

In the beginning of our discussions, we were ready to bury the passing of the Italian-Canadian grocery store. But as we delved into our research, Jim and I discovered that the Italian-Canadian grocery did not die at all. It had changed and evolved much like the Italian-Canadian community itself had evolved from the status of migrant and itinerant labourers in the post-Confederation Canada of the late 19th and early 20th century, into key participants into the life of modern late 20th century and 21st century Canada.

Our research is very much a work in progress and as we proceed some of our hypotheses may continue to further evolve and change.

Research

Jim Zuccherro and I will look at the evolution of the Italian grocery story from ma and pa owned stores that served their neighbourhoods, often composed of the transplanted *paisans* from their home town, or their region, to supermarkets, to mega stores to high-end elite designer stores that cater to the palates of the wealthy, culinary tourists and “foodies”. We will do this through our direct experience living and growing up in Toronto, and by means of interviews with people in the grocery business.

We will also undertake secondary research of academic writings on the Italian community primarily in Toronto, but also in some of the northern Ontario resources towns, in which I have lived and visited frequently like Timmins, where I currently reside, North Bay, Cobalt, Sudbury, Sault Ste. Marie and Thunder Bay. We will examine the records of the Ontario Food Terminal, the Toronto City Directory records and other archival information.

Jim has already looked at the Italian neighbourhood grocery store through his own personal experience growing up in his father’s grocery store on Vaughan and Bathurst. I have provided insights and perceptions from the perspective of a shopper who frequented Italian neighbourhood grocery stores, first in the Bloor and Ossington area from 1960 to 1965, and from 1966 to 1980 in the St. Clair St. W. corridor from Keele St. to Bathurst.

The Rise of the Italian-Canadian Grocery Store from Inner City Neighbourhood to Suburban Mega Store

The rise of the Italian neighbourhood grocery store and its evolution to the mega stores such as Longo's and Fortino's in Southern Ontario reflect the development of Italian-Canadian communities.

The evolution of the Italian grocery store can be used as a measure of integration and acceptance of Italian-Canadians into Canadian society and the acceptance of Canadian society by the Italian-Canadians.

The Italian community in its early history of the 19th century was tolerated as a necessity because it provided cheap labour. There was little desire to have Italians join the mainstream of what was then a very British society. If immigrants could not be British or American, then immigrants to Canada were preferred from Northern or Eastern Europe.

As Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, steered the country into a vigorous immigration policy designed to populate the west. Sifton was convinced of the economic potential of the west and the centrality of the west to the prosperity of Canada as a whole. He viewed immigration as a "national enterprise" to be undertaken in the same manner as the construction of the transcontinental railway. To this end, Sifton's department established immigration offices in the United States, Britain and several Central European countries in hopes of attracting experienced farmers."¹

Sifton wanted to build "a nation of good farmers." He felt that the west already had an oversupply of urban workers, and that to encourage the immigration of more city dwellers would only amplify the problems of urban poverty and unemployment and swell the slums of regional centres like Winnipeg. Accordingly, he instructed his agents to discourage the immigration of Italians, Blacks, Jews, Orientals and urban Englishmen who would not, he believed, succeed as farmers."²

Ironically, most Italian itinerant workers came from agricultural areas in Italy like Abruzzi, Calabria, Sicily, Friuli. Both in the periods prior to WW2 and after it ended. Few came from urban areas. But by and large most Italians with an agricultural background were attracted by the higher wages compared to what they were earning in Italy working in the fields under feudal conditions (Zucchi 19, 27).

¹ Manitoba Historical Society. http://www.mhs.mb.ca/docs/features/time_links/reference/db0053.shtml

² See footnote 1.

However, as John Zucchi has noted in his work, *Italians in Toronto: Development of a National Identity—1875 to 1935*, some of the itinerant Italian labourers who were supposed to return to Italy after their labour contracts were completed stayed in Toronto, Montreal, Vancouver and resource towns like Timmins, Ontario.³ This in turn created the need to provide a secure source of Italian food for these early Italian-Canadian settlers.

In the early 20th century many Italians came to Canada via the *Padrone* system. Labour contractors who brought the workers over sheltered them in their rooming houses and provided them the meals (Zucchi 47,48,54). But as more and more Italians remained (about 10,000 by the 1930s), the Italian grocery store began to emerge as Italians moved out of the rooming houses and bought their own homes in several areas including along College Street, Dufferin and St. Clair, the Danforth and Bloor St. West. One of the first Italian grocery stores to succeed and continue into today was Pasquale Bros. on King St. E.⁴ Zucchi wrote of Michael Basso's Grocery Store on Chestnut street that operated in the 1880s and 1890s. To supply the emerging grocery stores there were also several Italian foods importing companies that developed to import, olive oil, pasta, tomato sauce (71).

Through the years, particularly after the wave of immigration post WW2, the status of the Italian grocery stores and Italian cuisine changed in Canada. Neighbourhood Italian-Canadian grocery stores increased as the number of Italian-Canadians increased in the late 1940s through to the 1970s. In many respects, the changes reflect the acceptance of Italian culture into mainstream society and the acceptance of mainstream society by the Italian community.

The need for Italian grocery stores arose originally because mainstream stores did not provide Italian-speaking staff or Italian-Canadians were not comfortable in the knowledge of the English language to access it in the Loblaws or Dominion stores of the times. Once Italian-Canadian culture became accepted by the 1970s three things happened:

a) The mainstream stores started to make language available. Large-scale Italian-Canadian Grocery store chains became possible because the mainstream shoppers now shopped there too.

³ Canadian Museum of Immigration at Pier 21, Royal Commission on Italian Immigration, 1904-5, <http://Pier21.ca>.

⁴ *Toronto Star*, Nicholas Keung, Dec. 6, 2016. "Pasquale Brothers immigrant family store to celebrate 100 years in Toronto."

b) The increased affluence of Italian-Canadians meant they were no longer reliant on the neighbourhood store: they had purchased automobiles and moved to the suburbs.

c) Second and third generation Italian-Canadians pursued higher education and careers that meant there were no successors to run the family business.

Settlement Patterns of Italian Grocery stores 19th century

In the early years of immigration, as author John Zucchi has documented so well in his writings, often the only source of Italian food for the Italian migrant worker was at the lodgings where he stayed run by an Italian family.

In the earliest days in Toronto these lodgings were in the Ward, roughly the area bounded by Dundas West then known as Agnes Street in the south, Spadina on the West, College St. to the North and Bay Street to the East; the Glionna Hotel on the Corner of Bay and Elm (building is still there); there were lodgings in the College and Grace St. area and later in the Dufferin and St. Clair area. This was because of the *padroni* system John Zucchi covers in his book about Italians in Toronto up to 1935. (Zucchi 47, 48, 54). Once such lodging was the Glionna Hotel on the corner of Bay and Chestnut.

Grocery stores from the period 1880-1935 tended to follow regional Italian settlement patterns:

Sicilians on Queen St. E and Danforth

Calabrians and Abruzzese on College Street

Calabrians on Bloor and Ossington

Abruzzese on Dufferin and St. Clair Ave. W. (Zucchi 37, 38)

Zucchi argues that the highly divided regions back in Italy failed to develop the kind of Italianity that was formed in places like Toronto, and other centres of immigration where they developed Italian solidarity that was not yet achieved at home. This led to relations and in some cases intermarriage between individuals from different parts of Italy that would rarely occur back home. But ultimately Zucchi concludes that despite this growth of an Italian identity, ultimately the loyalty in Toronto was still to their home, town, villages and regions.

Italian Grocery Stores in Timmins, Ontario and other Northern Resource Towns

In Northern Resource towns like Timmins, Sudbury and Sault Ste. Marie a similar pattern of the *padrone* system emerged of labour agents who also ran boarding houses and hotels which provided meals. As the men moved out of the lodgings and into the community many of the labour contractors opened stores to serve the community. For example, in Timmins Leo Mascioli and his brother Antonio served as labour agents for the mines, they then opened lodgings that served Italian foods (Calabrians in South Porcupine, and Abruzzese in the Moneta central Timmins—though there was more mixing of regions as there was in Toronto).

The two major Italian grocery stores in Timmins were Mazzuca's and Scullino's, though there were several other smaller establishments like DiMarco's. Italian grocers in Timmins were focused on Pine Street South, an area known as the Moneta. More research is needed on South Porcupine Italian grocers. However, there were about four or five Italian Canadian grocers in Timmins, a town of about 28,000 up to 1974 when it was amalgamated with South Porcupine, Porcupine and several other villages. The Italian population at its peak was 7,000 in the 1960s, but a series of downturns in the mining based economy led to many leaving in the 1970s and then again in the 1990s.

A Personal Recollection: College St., Bloor St. W. and St. Clair Ave. W.

The stores I remember quite vividly after my family arrived in Canada in 1959 were:

Bloor St. W. and Ossington

Calabrese Grocery Store (Delaware and Bloor W.)

Nicastro's (already a supermarket with shopping carts)

Garden City Grocers (Concord and Bloor W.)

Longo's (Carling and Bloor West – now Dooney's Cafe)

Gasparo's Carling and Bloor West

Carito Bloor West and Crawford

Remo's (Bloor W. between Concord and Ossington) later moved to Westmoreland and Bloor Liotta's (Bloor St. W. and Salem)

Ferlisi (Bloor W. and Lansdowne)

College Street

Porco Bros. College and Montrose

Lombardi's College and Grace

Neighbourhood Italian Grocery Stores Were Cultural Centres, Dispensers of Credit and Friendship Centres

The provision of home delivery was one reason for shopping at the neighbourhood Italian store rather than the mainstream chain stores. My family still did not have a car during the 1960s. Loyalty programs offered incentives for customers to keep shopping at a store. My family favoured Remo's Grocery as mom would come home with new dish sets, glasses, fry pans from Remo's.

Thursday nights were always a big night for my sister and I because that is when the grocery van pulled up and our treats such as biscotti, chips, pop arrived. Sometimes we were disappointed as the wrong box would arrive. Grocers used thick black markers to write the addresses of the house that was to receive the box (often a banana box). Sometimes they got the house numbers mixed up and the wrong grocery box would arrive.

Some of the stores from the St. Clair Corridor included:

- Zuccherio's (Vaughan, Bathurst and St. Clair)
- Gasparro – (Vaughan, Bathurst and St. Clair)
- Janetta – (Bathurst and Alcina)
- DeMaria – (St. Clair W. and Humewood)
- Delia – (St. Clair W. near Oakwood)
- Pusateri's – (St. Clair W. near Northcliffe)
- Bosco / Termini – (St. Clair W. near Earls court)
- Diana – (St. Clair W. near Dufferin *still operating*)

1970s: Italian-Canadian Supermarket Chains and Mainstream Stores Providing More Italian foods

By the 1970s, already in the first ten years we had lived in Canada, changes were occurring to Italian grocery stores. Many families were buying cars and were no longer tied to the neighbourhood store for delivery. Larger scale stores, still primarily catering to the Italian community started up. These stores mimicked or resembled mainstream stores like Loblaws, Dominions or A&P. Some of the new supermarkets that emerged in the 1970s included Darrigo's, Bonanza, Pirri, Lady York and Galati Bros. But by the late 1960s and early 1970s more mainstream grocery chains were also providing Italian foods: Food City (Oshawa Wholesale) on Dupont and Shaw for example.

Move to the Suburbs

A large scale move by the Italian communities on College Street and St. Clair Avenue began in the 1970s as many moved to modest bungalows in York, Downsview, Etobicoke, and Scarborough. Such moves were accompanied by increased wealth accumulation and the purchase of an automobile.

By the 1980s large suburban Italian Supermarket Chains appeared to reflect the changing demographics of the Italian-Canadian community once concentrated along College Street, Bloor West, the Danforth and St. Clair Ave. W. but now in North York, Etobicoke, Scarborough, Woodbridge, Richmond Hill, and Mississauga. The naming of the stores also changed. Some were now, like Aurora Foods and Weston Produce, named after locations within the Toronto area—Weston Foods, Aurora Foods.

Some of these suburban chains included:

Weston Produce (North York, Vaughan and Richmond Hill)

Longo Foods (Mississauga and Vaughan)

Aurora Foods (Mississauga)

Fortino (Hamilton)

Old Neighbourhood Stores Started Closing

The neighbourhood grocery stores still left in the old Italian neighbourhoods carried on, if they could, but eventually through loss of customers to suburban migration, and the loss of successors to carry on the business—the stores began to close when the owner retired. As store owners reached retirement age, and their children were graduating as lawyers, accountants, professors and educators, no one was left to run the family business. Many of these stores closed entirely or sold to Portuguese, Chinese and Koreans in the late 1980s and 1990s. Many kept the Italian name and awnings which advertised Primo, Unico and other well-known products e.g. Foti Grocery on Ossington and Hallam.

Italian Grocers that Cater to the Wealthy and Elite in the City

Pusateri's and Badali took a different route than Longo's and Fortino's. Pusateri's and Badali's established themselves in upscale Toronto neighbourhoods. Pusateri which had its start on St. Clair Avenue West

near Dufferin evolved into a boutique grocer who catered to the tastes of North Toronto, Forest Hills and Yorkville. According to the *Toronto Star*, Pusateri even opened a store in the Eaton's Centre in partnership with the first Saks Fifth Ave Store to open in Toronto. Longo's opened a store on Bloor St. E in the Hudson Bay Centre.

In Timmins

In Timmins and other small resource towns, the neighbourhood grocery which was prevalent until the 1970s, began closing as the population diminished, children moving to university cities and never returning and the large chains introducing the availability of Italian foods. In the 1970s first Mazzuca's closed and then in the 1980s Scullino's closed. But the shelves of mainstream stores such as Metro, Loblaw's, No-Frills and Food Basic are well stocked with Italian food staples and name brands.

The Future of the Italian-Canadian Grocery Store

The Italian grocery store has not died, as we feared in our original assumptions. It is still in existence, but it has changed and evolved from the very local, neighbourhood stores that reflected a time and place in the development of the Italian-Canadian community in Toronto. In places like Timmins it has virtually vanished. Toffanello's is the only one left and just recently Mark Toffanello retired and the business still carrying on as Toffanello's has been purchased by a non-Italian. Mainstream Canadian society influenced Italian-Canadians and we Italian-Canadians also influenced the tastes of mainstream society.

Next Steps

It is our aim to conclude our research into the evolution of the Italian-Canadian Grocery Stores in Toronto and smaller centres in Ontario. We hope to apply for grants from Ontario and Canadian grant-giving bodies that will help us to produce a manuscript ready for publication. Jim Zuccherro and I encourage other Italian-Canadian communities in British Columbia, Manitoba, Quebec and the Maritimes to undertake similar research into the evolution of the Italian-Canadian grocery stores in their area.

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