

Chicagoland's ITALIAN AMERICAN VOICE®

FRA NOI®

FOOD BIZ Oasis of italianità

by Charles P. Pecoraro

Of all the Chicago neighborhoods that are undergoing gentrification, development and an influx of new residents and businesses, none appear to be growing faster or with more pizzazz than the South Loop.

What formerly were ramshackle warehouses, dilapidated buildings and vacant lots in the area bordered by Cermak, Halsted, Congress and the lake have been — or are being — transformed into chic condos and campuses that beckon folks with upscale inclinations.

Restaurants and food shops are integrated into the scene, of course, but none seem to offer more culinary potential than Panozzo's Italian Market, a dandy deli introduced in February.

The name belongs to Mike and Ellen Panozzo, who made the transition from suburban to urban in 2005 when they moved from Oak Park to this lake-front community flanked by Grant Park. Ellen manages the store full time while Mike divides his time between the deli and his magazine publishing business.

One observation they made when they took up residency was the short supply of legitimate Italian food. There's a smattering of Italian restaurants and pizzerias in the area, but no specialty or takeout places similar to those on Taylor Street or Harlem Avenue. So they partnered with Tony Gierczyk, whose construction company builds retail and dining operations, and put together a business plan to tap into a potentially limitless market for carryout and catered Italian cuisine.

First and foremost was location. They hit the jackpot by finding an ideal site in the center of the activity and traffic on South Michigan Ave. Then Gierczyk got busy and converted it into a bright,

appealing store.

Next, and perhaps most important, was the quality of the food. They were convinced that the only way their new venture would succeed was for the product to be fresh, authentic, properly prepared, tasty and priced right.

As luck would have it, the husband of one of Panozzo's friends is John Asbaty, a talented young chef who learned the fine points of cooking under superchef Grant Achatz of the nationally acclaimed Alinea. Asbaty had grown weary of the late hours and pressure-cooker demands of a five-star kitchen, and jumped at the chance to work at the more leisurely pace of a deli.

When it opened a week after Valentine's Day, Panozzo's became an instant sweetheart of local residents and office workers, one of whom remarked, "What took you so long to get here?"



Mike and Ellen Panozzo and John Asbaty and Tony Gierczyk are capitalizing on the South Loop's endless appetite for quality Italian fare.

After five months, customer traffic is increasing steadily, the cash register keeps ringing and many of the patrons are repeats.

The well-conceived menu ranges from Asbaty's signature lasagna Bolognese to basic sandwiches. Pasta, salads, soups, sandwiches and homemade bread share the billing with daily specials like grilled octopus with spinach, penne with braised short rib ragu, herb-roasted chicken and other dishes with connoisseur overtones.

Among the hot and cold sandwiches are sausage and peppers, panino Italiano (Italian sub), prosciutto with fresh mozzarella and wildly popular Italian beef with meat roasted in-house. A wide assortment of cheeses and deli meats are offered, as are antipasti trays, gelato, Italian ice, cannoli, wine and beer.

Panozzo could have taken a more somber career path, but chose publishing and prosciutto over eulogies and wakes. He grew up in the city's Roseland community, where his family ran the legendary Panozzo Bros. Funeral Home, which has since relocated to Chicago Heights. The neighborhood Panozzo grew up in was so Italian that kids his age would choose a soppressata sandwich over a Big Mac or a Whopper any day of the week.

With his mother Netti and maternal grandmother Maria Rigoni cooking dish after delicious dish, he acquired an appetite and appreciation for gnocchi, risotto, polenta, baccala and other peasant fare. Years later, he's serving this same type of food.

Panozzo's Italian Market is located at 1303 S. Michigan Ave. in Chicago. Hours are Tuesday through Friday from 10:30 a.m. to 7 p.m., Saturday from 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. and Sunday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. (Closed Monday.) For details, call 312-356-9966 or visit www.panozzositalianmarket.com.