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### The Little Bake Shop That Could

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**Calandra's Bakery started as an immigrant's dream. Today it is a regional brand—and growing.**



*The original Calandra's Bakery at First and Bloomfield avenues in Newark, 1978.*

Luciano Calandra was 27 when he left the family farm in the Sicilian village of Camporeale in 1957 and made his way to America. Settling with relatives in New Jersey, he struggled at first with meager jobs in construction. Far from home, the American dream seemed elusive, especially for someone who could not speak or write English.

Calandra considered returning to Italy, but he stuck it out and eventually connected with a relative in the bakery business. Calandra apprenticed for three months without pay, then branched out on his own, first renting a small bakery in Newark and later buying the building at First and Bloomfield avenues, where three businesses had previously failed.



*Luciano Calandra Sr. in 1958.*

"The site had a bad reputation, and my father was a little concerned," says Luciano Calandra Jr. (better known as Lou). "But he put his soul into it. He'd make bread at night and delivered it himself to the local delis each morning."

Forty-six years later, the little bake shop in Newark's North Ward still carries the now-familiar Calandra name but has expanded into a 50,000-square-foot operation and been joined by a second Calandra bakery in Fairfield. Together they deliver baked goods to more than 300 supermarkets and delis throughout New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania, supplying fresh bread daily to an estimated 100,000 households.

Although Luciano Sr., now 78, still holds the title of president, it has been twenty years since he turned over the day-to-day operation of the company to his sons, Anthony, 45, and Lou, 41. Over the years, the operation has grown from three employees to 550. Along with breads and pastries, the Calandras now produce their own lines of wine, olive oil, coffee, fresh pasta, and sauces. The Calandra empire also includes four hotels, two of which contain restaurants and lounges, and the new Calandra's Italian Village retail complex, scheduled to open in June in Caldwell. These days, Anthony and Lou are more likely to be seen wearing business suits than the kitchen whites they donned when their father taught them the bakery trade some 30 years ago. Like many second-generation Italians, the sons attribute their success to their father.



*Ortenzia Calandra in 1977.*

The senior Calandra had only been in America a few years and was still learning how to make a living here when his personal fortunes took a positive turn. Every morning, he would wave at the lovely woman sitting on the corner with a friend, waiting for the bus to take her to the sewing factory where she worked. Luciano finally got up the courage to ask out Ortenzia Gencarelli, herself a recent immigrant from Calabria, Italy. According to family legend, Luciano was two hours late for their first date, “because he was working,” says Lou. Ortenzia waited.

Luciano Sr. and Ortenzia wed in 1961 and began raising their family in Belleville while he built his business. No matter how hard Luciano Sr. worked, one pattern never altered.



*Anthony and Lou Calandra in the family's bakery in Fairfield.*

”He made a point of every night coming home for dinner, and then going back afterwards to close up the bakery,” says Lou. “He’s always instilled the importance of family. To this day he lectures us to make sure we are home for dinner at 6 pm.”

By age twelve, the boys were put to work in the bakery, first washing pots and pans, then learning to make the bread, then stocking the shelves in the store, and finally, at age 17, becoming “oven men.” Ortenzia would pick them up after classes at Seton Hall Prep (then in South Orange) and bring them to work. During college, the boys arranged their Seton Hall University classes so they would have the afternoons free to work.

“Most of my friends would cut class to go to Atlantic City,” says Anthony. “I’d cut class to go to work. That’s where I wanted to be.” By age 20, Anthony was taking on major responsibilities at the bakery. Meanwhile, Lou was becoming entrenched in the family’s nascent hotel business. In 1982, the Calandras built the Holland Motor Inn in Jersey City. And although Lou was just 16 at the time, Luciano Sr. felt he was ready to play a significant role.

“He’d wake me up at 5 am to go to the construction site, and I’d say, ‘I don’t know anything about construction.’ And he’d say, ‘As long as they see you on the job, you’ll get people to produce that much more for you,’” recalls Lou, who, by 17, had been installed as general manager of the new hotel.

It was the next project—the 1986 construction of the Best Western Fairfield Executive Inn with the Cucina Calandra restaurant and lounge on Route 46—that took a toll on Luciano Sr., who served not only as general contractor but also as designer and bookkeeper.

“He had a scare and was rushed to the hospital. It was a wake-up call,” says Anthony. “At that point, me and my brother stepped up. I was 24 and Lou was 20, but we knew all the ins and outs of all the businesses.” Today, the elder Calandras spend half the year in Naples, Florida, while their sons tend the business.

The Italian Village project is the focus of much of the brothers’ attention right now. The project has been twenty years in the making, ever since the family bought 3.5 acres on Bloomfield Avenue across from St. Aloysius Church in Caldwell. The original intent was to open their second bakery there, but instead they opted for Fairfield. Their proposal to build apartments on the Caldwell site was turned down by the town because the site was zoned for retail—so the Calandras came up with the Italian Village.

Like the Italian Pavilion at Epcot Center, the 18,000-square-foot space, complete with stone arches, hanging vines, and tiled walkways, will feature all things Italian, and, more importantly, all things Calandra. Opening in phases, the two-story building is to include a third Calandra’s bakery, a restaurant and lounge, a café, a gelateria, a wine store, and a deli market, each of which will highlight the Calandra line of goods. The village is expected to add another 120 people to the Calandra payroll.

In addition to teaching his sons how to bake bread and how to build a business, Luciano Sr. shared with them his formula for success: a strong work ethic, an emphasis on the family, and a belief that the customer is always right. On every Calandra’s bread bag, customers are encouraged to call or write with comments or complaints.

“If someone is not happy with the loaf of bread they bought a hundred miles away, we’ll give them a free loaf, and if it was inconvenient for them to reach us, we’ll throw in a free cake too,” says Lou. “We tell our people, ‘When there are issues, whether we’re at fault or not, be generous.’”

The Calandra brothers are passing along those pearls to their children. Anthony, who lives in Livingston, has a daughter, Kristin, 17, and son, Thomas, 15. Lou, who moved to Montclair five years ago with wife Teresa, has three daughters and one son, ages 6 to 14. Several next-generation Calandras are already involved in the business.

Thomas Calandra recently gave Anthony a sure sign that he was following in Luciano Sr.’s footsteps.

“I always did everything to impress my father,” says Anthony. “So the other day, my son said to me, ‘You know why I work so hard? To impress you.’ It was the exact same thing I had said to my father, 40 years earlier.”