

▼ **DOW** -37.05
18,576.47
▲ **NASDAQ** +4.50
5,232.89
▼ **S&P** -1.74
2,184.05

MONEY



Agostino Passanante (right), brother Gus (center) and an employee work behind the meat case at the butcher shop Agostino started a century ago. This picture hangs on the wall of the Agostino Foods office on Farragut Avenue in Bristol.

Food company changes with times

By **CRISSA SHOEMAKER DEBREE**
STAFF WRITER

A century ago, Italian immigrant Agostino Passanante opened a small butcher shop on Pond Street in Bristol. When he died, the shop was handed down to his sons.

Today, the shop itself is long gone, falling victim to changing consumer tastes and buying habits that favored full-service supermarkets over neighborhood butchers. But the Passanante name, and the family behind it, live on and continue to grow in the food business.

Nobody could even envision (the longevity of the company) back in the '20s," said Agostino's grandson, A.J. Passanante. "(Agostino's family) were visiting some family, and they said, 'What are you going back to Italy for?' One thing led to another and they said, 'What don't we start a grocery store?'"

Under Agostino and sons John, Gus and Bert, the butcher shop thrived for decades, until the post-World War II rise of full-service grocery stores made it difficult to compete. The brothers closed the butcher shop and thought about going their separate ways. Ultimately, however, they stuck together, building a new business selling meats to hotels, restaurants and the commercial ships coming and going from the nearby U.S. Steel plant in Falls.

A chance meeting with an Amana freezer salesman again changed the course of the Passanantes' business. The salesman convinced them to sell fully stocked freezers to residential customers. They sold all the freezers the salesman supplied in less than a month, and suddenly they were in the residential food delivery business.

"It was a hell of an idea," A.J. Passanante said. "People were able to buy in quantity and save money. That was the whole premise of how they got it started."

The business grew, and soon the brothers were delivering food to South Jersey, North Jersey, the Jersey Shore, Delaware and as far west as Harrisburg.

Yet, the times kept changing.

The "Do Not Call" law dealt a big blow to the industry. Suddenly, food delivery businesses like Passanante's could no longer buy lists of phone numbers and call people in the hopes of finding potential customers. Businesses had to find new ways to reach people.

"It's a young man's business," said A.J. Passanante, 65. "It's not a business for a guy my age."

That's why, when A.J.'s business partner retired in 2011, the family decided to sell the home foods delivery business. They found a buyer in Jason Jaworski, who had helped build a similar business in Maryland and was looking to go out on his own. He kept the Passanante name.

Agostino Foods, a meat processing firm that sells packaged food products to restaurants, resorts and other commercial customers, remains in the family, now overseen by A.J.'s son, John. Both companies maintain close ties; the home-services office is in a converted house just across Farragut Street from the food processing plant, which provides a lot of the food sold to customers of Passanante Home Food Service.

When Jaworski bought Passanante's home delivery service, he said it had eight



Workers prepare chicken for packaging in the Agostino Foods meat processing plant.

100th anniversary burger cook-off

Passanante's Home Food Services is celebrating its 100th anniversary with a "Battle of the Burgers" competition from noon to 6 p.m. Sept. 24. Prizes include cash and free burgers. The event, which includes vendors and entertainment, will be held at 1901 Farragut Ave., Bristol. Information: battleoftheburgers.eventbrite.com or 800-772-7786 ext. 208.

employees and about \$1 million in sales. Today, the company has up to 150 employees during peak periods, and sales offices in Bristol as well as in Colorado, Illinois, Maryland and North Carolina. It expects to see \$25 million in sales this year, he said.

Part of the growth, Jaworski said, has come from transitioning the company from one that sold well-known store brands to one that focuses exclusively on high-end foods that are unavailable in traditional grocery stores. That includes products from local companies like Illg's Meats, which closed its Warrington store last year and rebranded itself as a wholesale business; and Bensalem-based barbecue company Smoke'n Dudes.

"We've really been able to transition from a mass market (business) to one that focuses a lot more on quality and chemical purity," Jaworski said. "This is stuff you just can't find in the supermarket. And since it's become a smaller business, we've geared it towards a more niche customer."

In a nod to its roots, Passanante's also continues to sell freezers to customers who need them, as well as other appliances.

While successful, Passanante Home Food Services does have its share of critics.

Jaworski points to the number of five-star reviews on the company's Facebook page, but Yelp reviewers have been especially

vocal in their displeasure, citing missed sales appointments, what they see as high-pressure sales tactics and a lack of transparency about food costs.

The company doesn't provide an upfront list of food costs because each order is customized based on the customer's preferences, said Steve Fahey, director of marketing. Costs depend on the products a customer chooses, plus the frequency of delivery. A customer who buys six months worth of food, and pays for the entire order upfront, could see a greater percentage of savings than a customer who pays monthly and has small food orders delivered more frequently.

"Our main goals are to provide better food, to back it up with really great customer care, but to also come in at a price that is competitive and fair, that's not going to be a burden on your budget," Fahey said. "We want to save you time and hopefully, save you some money."

Splitting the business in two, John Passanante said, helps position both companies for future success.

Agostino Foods is also seeing growth, and is actively looking for a new location in Bucks County that could accommodate its nearly 50 employees and its food processing business, which serves other food businesses as well as Passanante's.

"Success is focusing on what you're best at," John Passanante said. "When I was 16, I was given a car and told to go run (customer) leads. But my strength has been in the processing side, what makes one steak better than another. Jason has breathed a breath of fresh air into (the home delivery side). And he can be confident in what they're out there selling. Their customers are getting the best quality product."

Crissa Shoemaker DeBree: 215-345-3186; email: cshoemaker@calkins.com; Twitter: @CrissaShoemaker

ACHIEVERS

Bucks County Community College Foundation, the college's non-profit fundraising organization, has appointed **Constance M. Furman** as president of its board of directors for the 2016-17 fiscal year. A Bucks alumna, Furman is senior vice president for First National Bank & Trust Co. of Newtown. In addition, **Katherine Sharp**, district manager for the Walgreen Co., was appointed to the board.



Sharp

Jennifer Sullivan, of Yardley, has joined Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton, as a social policy consultant. She is responsible for public policy advocacy and government relations. Sullivan, an attorney, has her own consulting practice, where she offers advocacy services to non-profit organizations throughout New Jersey. She's also a member of the Social Policy Committee at Catholic Charities, Diocese of Trenton. Prior to starting her consulting practice, she served for more than 12 years as the New Jersey State Advocacy Director for the American Cancer Society.



Sullivan

Greg Emmons, of Doylestown, recently joined the law office of Friedman Schuman in Jenkintown as a principal. Emmons, with 38 years of industry experience, is a member of the firm's financial services and real estate departments. His law practice focuses on commercial and residential real estate, banking, business, title, real estate brokerage and appraisal regulatory matters.



Emmons

Mike Esmond, of Lansdale, has joined HomeStarr Realty as a licensed real estate agent serving Bucks, Montgomery and Philadelphia counties. HomeStarr has offices in Bensalem, Upper Southampton, Montgomery Township, Northeast Philadelphia and Warrington.



Esmond

Crystal Miller-Spiegel, a Carversville resident, has been elected to serve on the Bucks County Audubon Society's board of directors. Miller-Spiegel, a senior policy analyst with the American Anti-Vivisection Society in Jenkintown, was previously with The Humane Society of the United States, the Humane Society University and Vetstreet.com.



Miller-Spiegel

Jim Amato, of Ivyland, recently was named Pennsylvania director of operations by the P.J.W. Restaurant Group, a New Jersey company that owns 18 restaurants, including P.J. Whelihan's Pub and Restaurant and other brands. Amato oversees five of the company's 10 Pennsylvania restaurants and is part of the senior management team working to expand the number of locations in Pennsylvania. Prior to joining PJW, he was the regional operations director for the Lehigh Valley Restaurant Group, managing 10 Red Robin restaurants. He also was general manager of the Knight House in Doylestown and the former owner of Bucks County Gourmet.

Dr. Michael W. Bickell has joined the St. Mary Comprehensive Urologic Specialists, the office of Drs. Jamison S. Jaffe and Justin D. Harmon. Bickell completed his residency in urologic surgery at the Albert Einstein Medical Center in Philadelphia, and completed fellowship training in andrology and reproductive medicine. The practice is in the St. Clare Medical Building on the St. Mary Medical Center campus in Middletown.



Amato

Send information about business achievers to money@calkins.com