



Meet the Cosentinos: GENERATIONS OF GEMELLI

Photo by Vicki Jauron, Babylon and Beyond Photography

Brought to you by the Neighbors of Babylon Village Team

When it comes to Italian food, the Cosentino family knows how to do it right. From the antipasti to the cannoli, they triumph from the first course to the last. You name it, they make it. And if it's not on the menu, they'll make it anyway. Gemelli's customers are happy.

Back in 1988, Gelsomina Cosentino (affectionately called Mamma Gemelli), used her life savings to help the family open an Italian market in Babylon. They commuted from Franklin Square, worked long hours and built a successful business. George Cosentino recalled, "One night, as they were getting ready to close, a man showed up asking for a tray of lasagna." As the family was about to apologize and say no, Mamma Gemelli said, "I'll make you lasagna." Two days later the man returned to tell them that it was the best lasagna he'd ever had! About this time customers began to ask for dishes such as linguine with white clam sauce. Gelsomina would tell them, "I can't cook it for you here because by the time you get home, it will all stick together." One woman welcomed her to come to her house and cook the dish, and Gelsomina graciously accepted. "That's the kind of woman she was," said Patricia. Gemelli soon expanded their offerings to include cold Italian delicacies as well as hot Italian dishes.

Mamma Gemelli always said, "You have to try! If you succeed, that's great. If you don't, pick yourself up and try again." That is the mantra undergirding the strong work ethic she continually conveyed to her children and employees. As one of eight children growing up in Italy, Gelsomina learned about the rewards of perseverance, sacrifice and love. "She would do anything for you," Patricia maintained.

It all began back in 1969 when Gelsomina and her husband, Vincent Cosentino, moved from Naples, Italy, to make a "better

life" in America. They moved with their daughter and two sons to a one-bedroom apartment in Ozone Park, Queens. Later, their fourth child, Vincent, was born. Gelsomina began working in a sewing factory in Queens. She also began cooking for her neighbors, making savory Neapolitan dishes like escarole pie. People began to offer her money for her tasty meals. "She was so taken aback that people wanted to pay her," said Patricia, but Gelsomina would never take anyone's money. Because so many of their cousins and relatives throughout Europe, as well as in the United States, were already involved in the food industry, the Cosentinos were naturally drawn to cooking. It soon became the foundation of their future success.

Gemelli means twins in the Italian language, but for the Cosentinos, it means family. And it's a really big family! The eldest child, Patricia, and her husband, Bobby Schutz, have a son, Marc, 26, and twin daughters, Alessia and Adriana, 23. Luigi and Maria, have boy-girl twins, Vincent and Gisella, 29. George and his wife, Stephanie, have three daughters, Sofia, 6, Lidia, 4, and Maria, 3. Vincent and his wife, Linda, have two daughters, Olivia, 9, and Sienna, 4.

After their children grew up, the Cosentinos became a "family of restaurateurs," each working in different segments of the food industry. They decided to come together and open the first store on November 17, 1988, just before Thanksgiving. Because family was everything to Gelsomina, she wanted all of her customers to feel like family. Patricia reminisced, "Mom always said, 'What does it hurt to say hello, how are you, to everyone you see?' It's a throwback to the old days when we knew everybody's names." The store was a tremendous success! Customers were in awe of the Italian authenticity and culture conveyed.



Photos by Vicki Jauron, Babylon and Beyond Photography



Gelsomina Cosentino



Four years later, after adding cooked entrees to their menu, they outgrew their 1,100-square-foot storefront. In 1992, they moved their burgeoning family business further down Main Street to its current location, which includes 4,000-square-feet of fresh produce, fresh meats, salads, breads, prepared foods, homemade sauces, packaged foods, desserts and more. Gemelli's became a place to pick up lunch and dinner, plan a barbecue, grab a tray of cannoli or cater a party. With the Cosentino parents and offspring all working together, Gemelli's has built a loyal customer base in Babylon Village and far beyond.

By 1997, the family had decided that Babylon Village needed an Italian restaurant. At that time, Babylon Village was not the dining mecca it

is today. The Village featured a few pubs, along with the long-running Glen's Dinette and the Greek Garden. The Cosentinos moved into a vacated spot. Shortly thereafter, Ristorante Gemelli opened its doors for the first time. They served everything Italian: antipasta, rigatoni, stuffed chicken breast, turkey London broil, shrimp scampi, filet mignon—all authentic cuisine.

At that point, the family decided to divvy up the work. Patricia and George ran the restaurant, while Luigi, Vincent, and Bobby ran the store. Patricia recalled, "Everybody pulled together. We were always exhausted. We didn't even stop to think, we just continued to work and work..." George explained their unity was a lifestyle. "We worked when everyone else was off. And if one of us got sick, we all jumped in to help. We're really hands-on owners."

Gemelli's was one of the first restaurants in Babylon Village that started to bring in customers from all over the region. The Cosentinos did not expect an onslaught of customers but,



Photo by Vicki Jauron, Babylon and Beyond Photography

like Mamma Gemelli had always taught them, "Dedication and hard work will pave the way for success." Many believe that Gemelli's helped put Babylon Village on the map of Italian dining.

Thanksgiving, Christmas Day and New Year's Day are the three days of the year that the Gemelli restaurant is closed. Of course, they're still cooking, but the turkey and lasagna (or in the case of New Year's Day, lentils, for the good health and prosperity they will bring) is for their own large family.

In 2012, the family business was ready to grow again. They took over the Bergen Point catering hall, which desperately needed a makeover. George recounted, "We saw a great opportunity. We worked hard and renovated the whole place." Vincent added, "We wanted to take a middle-of-the-road approach, because we wanted it to be a place that most people could afford." Vincent runs the day-to-day management of what is now Gemelli's at Bergen Point Country Club, hosting Sweet 16 parties, Bar and Bat Mitzvahs, weddings and many others.

After Gelsomina passed away on July 30, 2015, the family saw many of the young people who, over the years, had worked for her and now came to pay their respects. The common message they all shared was the admiration they had for her, because of the work ethic she instilled in them. "My Mom and Dad were like the Energizer bunny," Patricia mused. "They kept going when we were all exhausted." Everyone knew and loved Gelsomina. Patricia sees the family's success as a blessing. She explains, "We could never have imagined it."

All of the children agree that their mother would be proud of who they had become. They attribute their accomplishments to what Mamma Gemelli taught them: "Work hard, love strong, stay true to family and you will achieve everything you want in life!" In Babylon Village, the Gemelli stores and restaurants embody the family's American Dream.

Now, for future generations of the Cosentinos, the family is considering growing the business even more. They haven't yet decided where it will be or even what it will be, but Mamma Gemelli's grandchildren are ready to do what Cosentinos' do best: Italian food! They want to bring a little bit of Italy into everyone's kitchen and to everyone's palette. ■

DO YOU KNOW A NEIGHBOR WHO HAS A STORY TO SHARE?

Nominate your neighbor to be featured in one of our upcoming issues! Contact us at aberenblatt@bestversionmedia.com.