

THE BALDANZA STORY

The creed that Wendell Willkie lived by stated in part, “I believe in America because in it we are free — because we have great dreams and because we have the opportunity to make those dreams come true.”

This philosophy has drawn millions of people, since the founding of our country, to emigrate to our shores. Whether it is to find work, or to create a better way of life, people from all over the world have come here in hopes of obtaining a piece of “the American Dream.”

This cookbook is not just about the food. It is about the dream that led up to the delicious creations — the remarkable story of the Baldanza family, and one man’s journey into the unknown to seek a better life.

Nicola (Sal) Baldanza was born to Aida and Francesco Baldanza in the small coastal village of Amantea, Calabria, Italy in 1961. Sal grew up in a modest home with three brothers and four sisters. From oldest to youngest, they were Anna, Silvana, Alberto, Franca, the twins Rocco and Sal, Antonella and Giuseppe.



Twins Rocco and Sal at their first holy communion

Aida spent her days raising the children and cooking, while Francesco earned a living as a fisherman. The Baldanzas enjoyed life in their small community, where everyone knew everyone else. In 1976, however, their security ended when Francesco died unexpectedly at forty-eight. What the family thought had been a long bout with a stomach virus turned out to be terminal stomach cancer. Following two surgeries, Francesco passed away only three months after being diagnosed, leaving Aida with eight children ranging in age from three to twenty-two.

Life for the Baldanzas changed dramatically. Aida had always wanted her children to finish school, but now money was needed for food and clothing. The twins, Sal and Rocco, had to work full time instead of going to high school. They had been working after school since they were seven, gathering the wood needed to make wooden crates that carried oranges and other fruits to market. Now they were employed to build the crates.

Aida was a strong woman and kept her family together despite the hardships of losing a husband after twenty-five years. “She was a tough woman, and still is,” Sal recalls. “She was tough with us, too ... a lot of wooden spoons,” He laughed. “She could get through anything. She always did what was needed without complaining, and she always pointed us in the right direction.”

When they reached eighteen, Sal and Rocco received their Navy papers in the mail. They were now required to serve. This was a serious problem, because besides the twins, the only other working family member was Alberto. The Baldanzas could not afford to lose two boys to the Italian Navy. They met with some government officials and explained that the family desperately needed money. The only thing that could be done was that when one brother was finished with his eighteen-month term, the other brother would then have to leave and serve.

Rocco and Sal would be separated for three years. As their mother taught them, you do what you have to do. Sal decided to go first, so in August of 1981 he packed his bags and went to Taranto in Puglia, on the other side of the Adriatic Sea. After serving there, Sal was transferred to Rome for three months, and then to Sicily. Sicily was only two hours from home, so he could go back to visit the family every two weeks.

When Sal's term was up, Rocco, who now had a job doing construction, went into the Navy as agreed. Just a few months later, however, Sal packed his bags again and left to find new opportunities in America. There had been no work to be found for Sal in Italy, and it was time for him start a new life.

At age twenty-two, Sal didn't speak a word of English. When he arrived in the States in 1983, he would meet his sister Silvana, who had come to Huntington with her husband Vinnie during the 1970's. That would be all the family Sal would have here, and he lived with them for ten years.

The day after he arrived in this country he had a job, thanks to a few friends who had already made the journey from Italy to find work. Sal began as a dishwasher at Nina's Family Style Restaurant, then located in Huntington's Southdown Shopping Center. He worked full time, earning \$125 a week. Eventually it was at Nina's where Sal would meet the sweet seventeen-year-old American girl, Kate Ebert, who bussed tables there. Kate later would become his wife.

"It was an interesting relationship," Sal recalls, "since I didn't speak much English and she didn't speak any Italian. We'd go to the movies on a date, and I'd fall asleep because I didn't know what they were saying!"

Sal was a diligent worker. During slow times he'd stay in the kitchen and watch the chef. He took a keen interest in the cooking. After a year, Nina's owner, seeing this interest, said to Sal, "I think next week you're going to start to cook. I can see you like it."

Sal went from \$125 a week as a dishwasher to \$250 a week in the kitchen. By 1984, with a year of cooking under his belt, Sal heard that DiRaimo's was looking for someone in their kitchen. They were paying \$500 a week. Sal applied for the job and got it. At about the same time, Rocco had finished serving in the Italian Navy and made plans to come to the United States. Sal was able to get him a job at DiRaimo's, and the twin brothers were finally reunited.

Shortly after, in 1986, Alberto and youngest brother Giuseppe (Joe) now fifteen years old, arrived in Huntington and began working at the A&S Pork Stores: Joe in the Huntington store and Alberto in the Port Jefferson store. During his time in Port Jefferson, Alberto began learning how to make fresh mozzarella and other Italian specialties which would be the basis for Mr. Sausage in years to come.

After some time, Sal and Rocco grew tired of the long hours at DiRaimo's, and they approached the owners of A&S. As luck would have it, they had openings at both stores, so Sal began working with Joe in Huntington and Rocco started working with Alberto in Port Jefferson.



Sal in the Italian Navy

After six months, Joe saw an ad in *Newsday* and learned that a place called “Mr. Sausage” was available. He said to his brother, “Sal, there’s a pork store in Hicksville for sale.”

Sal answered, “Yeah? So what?”

Joe replied, “Let’s go see.”

“We didn’t even know where Hicksville was!” Sal recalls. “We had no experience, we didn’t know how to cut meat or how to talk with the customers. We were still learning the language!”

They went to see it anyway. The store sold only sausage and braciole, no cold cuts, cheeses or anything else you’d see in Mr. Sausage today. They thought about it for a few days when the owner approached them with a \$10,000 check in his hand — someone else had made him an offer.

“I remember Joe saying to me, ‘Let’s get it, let’s get it! We could put our money together.’” The brothers pooled all of their savings and purchased Mr. Sausage.

“I said to Joe, if we make it, we make it. If we don’t, we start all over again,” Sal remembers.

The original Mr. Sausage had been located at the old Farmer’s Market in Hicksville during the 1960’s. Grumman’s was close by, and business was very good. Eventually the Farmer’s Market caught fire, and the owner of Mr. Sausage had to find a storefront, which he did, only a mile or so away. But a year and a half after moving there, the owner had put his store on the market. He was older, and running the store had become too much for him. It was at this time that Joe had happened to see the ad.

“So we have this store now,” Sal recalls. “It was me, Joe, Alberto, Rocco and my brother-in-law Vinnie. What do we do now? Alberto was the only one making the mozzarella, and we did a little bit of cooking — not that much, because back then people did their own cooking. But we put a lot of money into the business, and started doing well. Of course, Grumman was there. Thousands of people were working close by, so we were very busy. Eighteen months later, though, Grumman began laying people off. We got scared, so we decided to look for an additional place in case we started losing customers — plus we were five people working in the same store.”

“We found this place in Copiague for about \$1,200 a month. Most rents were \$3-4,000, so \$1,200 was good. We bought the store for \$50,000 because we had made some money in the Hicksville store. We stayed for two years, but the store never grew. We didn’t have enough experience. Also, the clientele was looking for more of a deli-type environment, and we didn’t have that. So two years later we got rid of the store and we lost \$50,000.” Sal pauses. “We went back to Hicksville ... everybody ... and we started all over again.”

“We all lived in Huntington, but nobody knew Mr. Sausage there. We used to go to this little place in Halesite ... at the time it was called Salerno’s Deli. We did some business with them, bringing dried and fresh sausage that they bought from us. I could see their store wasn’t doing so good. It was empty all the time, so I said to my brother, ‘Why don’t we give him some money, cash, and we’ll take the place. I think this is a good area.’ And my brother Alberto says, ‘What, are you crazy?’”

“I kept telling my brothers, I know the guy’s not doing good. He’s going to close ... he’s going to close. But nobody (the brothers) wanted to do it.”

Shortly thereafter, they received word from a salesman that the Salerno had closed. The owner of the store wanted someone in there with experience, hoping the business would be around for a while. He visited the brothers at the Hicksville store and decided that they were

the only ones who could possibly make it in the Halesite location. He saw they had experience and he liked what they were doing. He asked \$23,000 for the store.

“We put all our money together again, but we came up short,” Sal explains. “We had just lost \$50,000 in the Copiague store. We didn’t have that kind of money. What were we going to do? I told my brothers, we’ve got to get that store.” He continues, “I was only married to Kate a year at this point. Kate told her mother about the problem. She asked me, ‘How much do you need?’ I told her we’re short about \$12,000. She said, ‘I’ll give it to you because I believe in you guys. If you make money, you pay me back. If you don’t make the money, it’s water under the bridge.’” Sal laughs, recalling the moment. “She also said she’d pay for our advertising. So we



Mama Aida making some of her delicious dishes in the kitchen of their home in Amantea

have the money now — and nobody wants to buy the store. Rocco, Joe, Albert, my brother-in-law ... they didn’t want to buy it because they were scared, and I understood why. They said if we didn’t make it, then what were we going to do?”

“I also had a bunch of people I knew at the time saying ‘don’t do it, don’t do it.’ I listened to that but I said, you know what? I’m going to do it by myself. We’ve been in business for five years. This is what we’re doing. We’ve got to take this last chance. If we don’t make it over here, everybody is going to do something else ... a mechanic, somebody will do this, somebody will do that.

I just think we have to take this opportunity now. They still said no, we don’t want the store. I tried to have some friends convince them. Finally, after a lot of talking we were all in agreement. Joe had agreed to come with me to manage it. So we bought the store and we started working. We did everything ourselves. We were making sausage, we were cooking, we were mopping the floor, we were washing dishes ... everything.”

For months, Sal and Joe ran the store with no help of any kind. It wasn’t until that Christmas they hired one guy to work the front counter. Six or seven months later, the store started growing. By the time they left that location eight years later, they had seven people working for them. Now, in their present location on Union Place they have fourteen working for them, and twenty-five during the Christmas season. Since they began in Halesite, the business has tripled.

“Making the decision to go with it opened the door for everybody. We got through the hard times. As the Calabrese say, ‘testa dura.’ You’ve got to think it, you’ve got to believe it, don’t give up!” Sal says.

“We knew our products were good, we just had to believe we could make it. We really took a chance coming to Huntington. Nobody knew Mr. Sausage. We had to bring the people in. We only advertised for six months. That’s it. We never advertised again.”

In 2004 they closed the Hicksville store and opened up another store in Melville which is run by Rocco, Alberto and their brother-in-law Vinnie. It is here where their famous sopressata

(a dried Italian sausage) is made. They learned how to make it on their own. A friend gave them the basics, but it has taken years to perfect it. The Baldanzas have been making sopressata for sixteen years now, and they feel that they have perfected it in the last eight years. Five to six hundred pounds are made each week by Alberto. It takes about four weeks to dry out. It is sold in the store as well as to restaurants and delis.

As for the prepared food in both stores, Sal knew that consistency in the taste and quality of the food was critical to the success of the business. He held fast to his roots and his Italian heritage. He says that some of his recipes were discovered through trial and error, others were researched, and of course most were family-inspired.



*Alberto (l.) and Joe (r.)
making sausages*

“Mama Aida’s Sauce” is a traditional recipe from the countryside where Sal grew up, and is a sauce his mother cooked often during his childhood. Made from fresh vegetables from local growers, Sal adapted this family favorite to honor his mother. It’s now a staple in the store.

“Nicolas Sauce” was named after Sal’s first child. Sal was looking for healthy, quality food that would appeal to kids. This mild red sauce loaded with homemade chicken mini-meatballs has become a favorite of many customers and their children.

Sal enjoys creativity in cooking, and his products and food are both unique and diverse. He describes his food as rustic and simple, and made with fresh ingredients with a southern Italian influence. Sal is constantly developing new recipes and often asks customers to sample them. Anyone who has gone to Mr. Sausage knows that it always smells fantastic there. Something is always being cooked, and large platters of delicious food

are lined up creatively along the overstuffed countertops. “Seeing and smelling the food right there makes you want to buy it on the spot,” one regular customer states. “It’s fresh, it’s homemade. When I come in I rarely leave with just one item. Everything looks so good you just want to try it all. It’s like coming home. It’s definitely a dangerous place to come to if you’re hungry,” he laughs.

It’s this kind of “homey” feeling that the customers keep coming back for. “Everyone is like family here,” says Sal. “Our store isn’t a chain. It’s a family-run business with an intimate atmosphere. I’m interested in getting to know my customers and their families. I love people and I enjoy making them happy.”

Whatever Sal is doing, it’s working, because customers flock to the store. Generally, Sal and his brothers put in an 80-plus-hour work week, and that’s just during normal business days.

“Christmas is unique, as it is the busiest holiday of the year for us,” Sal says. “An enormous amount of overtime is required and we implement a unique strategy to handle the extreme volume of business in a short period of time. During Christmas, we generally put in at least 110 hours that week.” Sal explains that organization is key, and family members are critical to help with the setup and distribution of orders during Christmas. “Our family and friends will aid in this extended setup, as well as tasks like dishwashing, chopping, slicing and dicing.”

Business is consistently brisk during the entire summer season, as well as on Super Bowl Sunday, New Year's, Easter, Memorial Day, the 4th of July and Labor Day. According to Sal, these are the busiest times of the year.

People come to Mr. Sausage not only for their prepared foods and hospitality, but for their prime meats, imported products, and Italian favorites such as fresh mozzarella, fresh and dried sausage and salami, which are made on the premises. The imported goods come from distributors that deal with products coming directly from Italy. Sal tries to carry exclusive items and more obscure brands and products. Basically, you can find anything Italian at Mr. Sausage.

As far as the family is concerned, Sal is happily married to Kate and enjoys their two young children, Nicolas and Olivia, and he works side by side with his brothers every day. "My brothers and I have a high respect for one another and what we each bring to the business," says Sal. "Outside of the store we socialize frequently, enjoy each other's children, and share many laughs." They also remain in constant contact with their mother in Italy, as well as other relatives who support their success in this country.

When asked what a typical day in the kitchen is like, Sal responds, "Jovial! It's a busy environment but always with laughter. A great team is very important in any business and we have that." He continues, "It's difficult at times, but overall it is very rewarding ... I love my job! It's a way to reach out to others and share my love of food and people."

Sal's future goals include possibly opening more stores, or even a restaurant, and exploring other avenues that bring people and food together. "I've developed a diverse network of friends through my shop, including business owners of other trades, as well as foodies that offer great advice and have a passion for good food," he says. "My friends and family give me inspiration and have provided me with a lot of encouragement and support."

One man's journey into the unknown has become an "everyman's" success story. Was it worth the risks? As he comes out of the kitchen carrying a steaming pot of pasta fagioli, Sal says with a grin, "You bet!"



*Rocco slicing Alberto's
homemade sopressata*