

Vince's Gourmet Imports gets personal, grows revenue

By Eric Reinhardt

Journal Staff

NORTH SYRACUSE — From the back-room, Vincent Lombardi heard one of his loyal customers call out to him, using his first name and seeking service at the deli.

"We're on a first-name basis with most customers," says Lombardi.

And he would have it no other way at Vince's Gourmet Imports, an Italian-import grocery store that operates in a 12,000-square foot building at 440 S. Main St. in North Syracuse. Lombardi and his son-in-law, Salvatore (Sam) Mondello opened the store in November 2006.

"We carry a lot of the specialty items that you're not going to find in some of the bigger stores that are out there," says Mondello, noting the product line includes imported dishes, chocolates, desserts, and meats and cheeses in the store's deli.

Everything the store handles is "the real McCoy" when it comes to imported Italian food, whether it's olive oils, sauces, or pastas, Lombardi says. He notes, however, that the store doesn't import directly from Italy, but from distributors in bigger U.S. cities, such as New York and Chicago. One such distributor is Cento Fine Foods of Thorofare, N.J.

Vince's Gourmet Imports is also a reminder of the not-too-distant past when Williams Supermarket operated on the same stretch of road (Route 11) in North Syracuse before closing in the early part of the decade. That store also catered to cus-



ERIN ZEHR/CNYBJ

Vincent Lombardi, co-owner of Vince's Gourmet Imports, replaces one of the meats in the company's deli after cutting an order for a customer. The business, co-owned by Lombardi's son-in-law Salvatore (Sam) Mondello, is an Italian-import grocery store located at 440 S. Main St. in North Syracuse.

tomers seeking imported-Italian food.

Mondello had purchased the building in January 2006 for the purpose of renovating and leasing space, but after speaking with his father-in-law, the pair decided a grocery store would be a good use for the building.

As co-owners, Lombardi and Mondello share an equal partnership in the busi-

SMALL-BUSINESS SNAPSHOT

Vince's Gourmet Imports

440 S. Main St.

North Syracuse, NY 13212

Phone: (315) 452-1000

www.vincesgourmet.com

- **Type of business:** Italian-import grocery store
- **Year founded:** 2006
- **Employees:** 10 (combination of full and part time)
- **Square footage:** 12,000
- **Company owners:** Vincent Lombardi and Salvatore (Sam) Mondello

ness. In addition to the owners, Vince's employs three full-time workers and five part-time employees. The store also adds two to four seasonal, part-time employees at Christmas and Easter time.

Lombardi and Mondello wouldn't disclose the company's annual revenue for 2008, but say sales increased 15 percent in 2008. They hope for similar growth this year.

"I can't attribute it to any one specific food product or department that we have, it's just the overall experience," says Mondello, noting that food and family are part of Italian heritage, which the store emphasizes with its customer base.

Customers can give the store their e-mail addresses, and Mondello sends them

store specials and recipes, something he calls "the personal touch."

The store also provides advice to customers who might see different recipes on the popular cable television channel Food Network.

"We give a lot of advice to new cooks; anything that they see on these gourmet shows, they're looking for a different product, and a lot of people don't know how to use it," says Lombardi.

One improvement the business has made since opening is adding a small loading dock to expedite the process of transporting delivered goods from trucks into the store. Plus, Mondello wants to add extra freezers in the store to accommodate the demand for the store's prepared meals.

Before joining his father-in-law in the business venture, Mondello worked in sales for Upstate Office Equipment in Westmoreland, Nextel in Syracuse, and from his home for Cleveland, Ohio-based Pioneer Manufacturing Co., Inc.

Before opening Vince's Gourmet Imports, Lombardi owned Lombardi Fruit & Imports Co. at 534 Butternut St. in Syracuse with his brothers John and Dominic. Lombardi's brothers continue operating that store.

As for those customers who fear Vince's store will close because of the difficult economy, Mondello simply tells them, "We're going to be here a long time." □

Contact **Reinhardt** at ereinhardt@cnybj.com