

THE PAST MEATS THE FUTURE *The Survival of an Old World Butcher*

“Hey, get back to work!”

Lou DeRosa, the 54-year-old owner of Marconda’s Meats, the oldest standing butcher in Los Angeles, is approaching us as we’re chatting with his son and employee Thomas DeRosa, 22. Lou is smiling; he was only joking. Kind of. It’s almost noon and they need to get their delivery orders out before the Friday afternoon rush hits The Original Farmers Market, where Marconda’s Meats is located.

“I need 20 legs for this order,” says Lou and hands his son a packing list, effectively ending our conversation.

The Original Farmers Market is an historic Los Angeles landmark and tourist attraction. It first opened in July of 1934 when a handful of local farmers started selling produce out of the back of their trucks at third and Fairfax. Before long, they began setting up permanent stalls, accompanied by little eateries and specialty shops, like Marconda’s Meats.

Today, the market has little in common with a typical farmers market. Most of the farmers are gone, replaced by a quaint, European-style food court with a few delis and tourist shops. The majority of the original stalls have either switched hands or closed shop.

Marconda’s is one of the few establishments at the market still owned and operated by the same family. It was founded in 1941 by Lou’s grandfather’s nephew, Fred Marconda. Marconda ran the business together with Lou’s grandfather until 1976, when Lou’s father took over.

Today, Lou calls the shots. His youngest son Thomas handles the family’s poultry shop, Puritan Poultry, while Thomas’ two older brothers work with dad over by the meats.

“My kids are the fourth generation here,” says Lou, seated at one of the mint green bistro tables by his stall. “My dad retired in 1994, but he still comes by every weekend to make the schedule, even though he’s 89 years old now. That’s been the feel of the business for all of these years – family.”

The family originates from Pennsylvania, and the market’s east coast vibe with its Old World specialty shops is what gets Lou excited.

“I like this place. If you were to move me down the street into a building, I might survive but I probably wouldn’t be happy.”

But running a small family business isn’t just fun and games. Marconda’s tries to distinguish itself by selling only all-natural meat, free of antibiotics and hormones, something they’ve been doing since the early 90’s when humanely raised cattle was still a novelty. But it’s still hard work to compete with the lower-priced supermarkets.

“Grocery stores are all about the price, not about the quality,” says Lou. “Here, we’re all about quality and we try to give you the best price we can.”

Another competitor is the adjacent shopping mall The Grove, which opened in 2002. But that has more to do with space.

“Before the Grove opened, the level of customers had dwindled a bit, and so the mall brought new life to the neighborhood,” explains Lou. “At the same time, it hurt us because parking became an issue.”

Accessible customer parking is key for Marconda’s who thrive on repeat customers, not on random tourists wandering in from the Grove looking for a snack. The one-off customer willing to continue shopping at the mall with a sausage stuffed in their purse is not what keeps the specialty stores at The Original Farmers Market afloat. The regulars do.

Local Angelenos Jack Fogarty, 87, and his wife Jo Anne, 72, have faithfully been coming to the Original Farmers Market every Friday afternoon for more than 50 years. They wouldn’t dream of buying their meat from anyone else but Lou, even if it means they now have to deal with parking.

“We’ve always done our shopping here at Marconda’s,” says Jack, a former Hollywood producer and writer on shows like Charlie’s Angels and T.J. Hooker. “Our kids were raised on this meat and they won’t eat meat from anywhere else. I can buy the best ground beef at Gelson’s and they’d go, what’s this? You can’t fool them.”

It’s the quality and the service that keep the Fogartys coming back every week.

“The thing that I love about it is that you have a selection at the butcher’s and they learn what you want and you don’t have to go through it every time,” says Jack as he pays for his New York steaks. “You can just go and pick it up.”

For the Fogartys, it’s important to support local businesses that provide that little extra something, especially in a world where specialized merchants are becoming a thing of the past.

“I love what they did to the Grove, they made it so pretty, but we miss some of those old specialty shops that don’t exist now,” says Jo Anne, a former legal assistant.

Jack and Jo Anne fondly remember a produce grocer at the market who “majored in strawberries” and used to give their children free samples whenever they would come by. And another one who sold the best blintzes in the city.

“They’re gone forever and they’re not coming back,” says Jack. “When you get older you realize you’re going to lose some very special things because people either don’t know about them anymore or aren’t interested enough to do anything about it.”

Jo Anne nods in agreement.

“It’s an instant world now, and good things sometimes takes time to seek out.”

Lou DeRosa is not waiting for the world to seek him out. Instead, he tries to keep up with the times by selling his meat online. By doing so, he hopes to get his name out there and reach new customers through home deliveries.

By the time the old clock tower at The Original Farmers Market strikes 1 pm, Lou and his boys are almost done wrapping up the last of the delivery orders. Lou loves working with his family, but he admits to wanting better for his kids.

“It’s never been that I don’t want my kids to go elsewhere to work. I do. I want them to do better than they can here. This is not a business where you get wealthy and have other people working for you. You have to work right along side of them to make it, and it isn’t the most profitable thing in the world. It’s like my dad used to say way back, ‘You’ll never get rich but you’ll never go hungry.’”

Lou’s youngest son Thomas is currently in college studying business. But he still plans on staying on at Marconda’s, in one way or another. It’s a family business after all, and he enjoys it. Most of the time anyway.

“It has its ups and downs, but you can’t stay mad at family,” says Thomas with a chuckle as he packs up the chicken legs his dad ordered.

Emeli Emanuelson



Marconda's owner Lou DeRosa is giving his son Thomas DeRosa daily delivery instructions. Photo: Lily Cameron



Regulars Jo Anne and Jack Fogarty have been buying their meat from Marconda's for more than 50 years.



When The Original Farmers first opened in 1934, local farmers sold fresh produce out of the back of their trucks. Today, it serves more as an open food court to the adjacent shopping mall The Grove.



The Clock Tower has been an icon of The Original Farmers Market since 1948.



The DeRosas start setting up the case every morning at 8 am. Photo: Lily Cameron