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- Homes
- Classifieds

They hooked a big one

Family-owned store prides itself on fresh seafood

Ted Whipp, The Windsor Star

Published: Wednesday, March 31, 2010

Customers fill the small, crowded, neighbourhood seafood shop on a busy afternoon before the weekend.

They browse containers and displays full of fish, look through freezer shelves and mostly enjoy the store, Mediterranean Seafood, at 980 Parent Ave.

The owners, the Aiuto family, expect still more sales and customers ahead of the traditional Easter holiday, as shoppers purchase fish for the traditional Good Friday meal.



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Dina Aiuto and her son Ross pose with a frozen shark used only as a display, at the family-owned Mediterranean Seafood store on Parent Avenue in Windsor.

Dan Janisse, The Windsor Star

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There's much to find here, customers say, appreciating the freshness and wide selection, such as European cuttlefish, anchovies from the Adriatic Sea, and the large, live snails from Portugal poking out of a display.

"We clean everything," says Ross Aiuto, who operates the family enterprise with his parents Dina and Frank Aiuto.

Now 30 years old, Mediterranean Seafood remains very much a busy, ongoing enterprise. The family also operates a Leamington location, Mediterranean Seafood, at 48 Erie St. S.

In all, the business can provide up to 200 varieties of seafood, especially during busy periods such as Easter, Dina Aiuto maintains.

As wholesale food service sales to restaurants have sunk with the decline in the hospitality industry, the business has offered its own food preparation service in recent months, offering to grill, fry or bake fish orders on request. The service costs \$1 per pound for frying, \$1.50 for grilling and \$2 for baking.

"It's an inexpensive way to enjoy seafood," Ross Aiuto explains.

For a few years in the 1990s, the family also operated a popular seafood restaurant adjacent to their Windsor store. Currently, the space is rented out for a cafe and lounge.

The family business began in the recession of the 1980s, with Dina and Frank

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Aiuto creating their own employment and a wholesale and retail seafood source, Aiuto explains. The service to cook fish has helped during the latest, more severe recession, making use of kitchen space and appealing to customers.

"Windsorites are still eating fish. They're just not dining out as much," Aiuto says.

He notes he's answering environmental questions from customers wanting to know more about seafood.

The local food movement has helped business, as customers seek out smaller, neighbourhood stores over large supermarket and grocery stores, he says.

The business also supplies wholesale customers as far away as London, Hamilton and Sarnia. Aiuto regularly makes trips to Toronto two to three times a week. The frequency of his commutes with a truck benefits the customers who like their fish as fresh as possible.

If a customer wants fresh fish in the morning, someone had to drive all night to get it, says Aiuto repeating a saying in the business.

"If I say it's fresh, I know it's fresh," adds his mother, Dina.

The best advice when buying fish is simply to know and trust the fish monger selling it, they say, adding that their fish is never defrosted and sold as fresh.

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