

# Jim Alesci's Place celebrates its 30th year of business in Solon

By RITA KUEBER

At Jim Alesci's Place in Solon, from the bustling kitchen to the aisles filled with friends and customers seven days a week, it's clear that the appeal of great Italian food made with love hasn't waned in 30 years of business in Solon. Step inside, and first, you'll appreciate the aromas, notably the scent of garlic and tomato in the air. Cannoli and cookies are displayed like jewelry in glass cases. Shoppers can choose from dozens of main and side dishes, salads and soups all made from scratch following family recipes. Shop for groceries, cheese, wine, and more, eat in the tidy café, or take something home for dinner.

Frank Alesci founded the original Alesci's in 1943 on Kinsman Avenue. Over the years, cousins and franchisees developed sister stores in various locations. In 1991, Frank's grandson Jim, and Jim's wife, Gina, established their own operation in Solon. Jim Alesci's Place was on Station Street for 23 years, and at its current location on Solon Road for seven.

Jim's son, Frank, president of the Solon location, is hospitable and professional. His passion for the family business is evident. He muses on the family's history and all that Alesci's has to offer. He talks about how his great-grandfather brought people from Sicily to work in the store because they could easily speak Italian with the customers. "I've had families talk about our bread, the Scaletta, or 'little ladder,' all handmade. They tell us how they would buy two loaves – one to eat in the car on the way home, and one for the rest of the week." He describes the nostalgia of people older than his parents coming to Alesci's for the exact ricotta or pizza dough their grandmother used in her recipes. "We are completely connected to traditions," he says.

"My grandmother had a book with things like 'Aunt Lil's recipe' that would serve eight," he says. "It took some work to figure out how to create the same authentic dish on a grand scale for 80 or 800. Counter-intuitively, it's not just doubling everything. There's a proportion that needed to be worked out."

Frank himself is just slightly older than the Solon store. He grew up in the business, working after school as an apprentice. He's a Gilmour alum and attended Le Cordon Bleu, but he credits his father and aunt, Donna Sapp, with teaching him to cook. This family line starts with Frank (the founder), then Frank, Jim, and Frank, the fourth generation. The youngest Frank mentions how his sisters Gabrielle and Brigette have worked in the kitchen as well. The Solon operation has thirty-five employees who are regarded as family. Frank does business with the same suppliers his grandfather used 50 years ago. "Relationships are vital," he adds.

Frank talks about the community surrounding the store and the support the family has received from customers over the years. "We are just truly blessed – it's been amaz-



**Jim Alesci's Place proudly marks 30 years in business this month as a full-service Italian grocer and catering business. Pictured in their Solon Road store, which spans over 12,000 square feet, are (from left) Donna Sapp and her brother Jim Alesci, and Mr. Alesci's children, Frank Alesci and Gabrielle Alvarez. Photograph by Michael Steinberg**

ing," he says. He describes close connections to the city, the business community, schools, and customers in general from Solon to Bainbridge, and throughout the Chagrin Valley.

He describes how the business has served 'fast casual' meals before that category was a thing. Today 'fast casual' is the fastest growing sector in dining today. But Alesci's has always had fresh meals at the ready from appetizers to desserts.

The area in which Frank and his family have noted

true growth is in the service/catering area, preparing a meal and sometimes serving it for private gatherings from weddings to funerals, to celebrations and corporate events. Frank describes setting up meals for local high school teams, feeding the crew at an office, or parties for a thousand. He indicates he and his family are ready to take on more of these events as people start to return to normal – getting out in a public setting.

It takes a lot of effort to keep the store open and stocked with meals and baked goods. Christmas Eve is the busiest

day, and lasagna is Alesci's very best seller. "I love selling our lasagna because I know our customers will be pleased. Using our dishes is a way to focus on family," Frank says. "It allows the host to host, and not get stuck in the kitchen. I remember my mom working through her own parties – we want to prevent that from happening. We want our hosts to relax, but we also want their guests to enjoy great food."

"We aim to keep personal traditions alive," he adds. "We offer an authentic experience. It's our legacy. We're shepherds to tradition, and it's totally a labor of love."