

Farmington LIFE

Business

The Silo restaurant is a case study

What happens to a family business when the patriarch is gone?

by Natalie K. Pollock

The Santorso family bought the Silo restaurant on Route 4 in 1961 and became first-time operators of a busy food business. Twelve years later William Santorso, patriarch of the family, died and left the business to his wife and children to manage.

Then, about three years ago, after an unsuccessful bid by a local developer to buy the property and put in a national retailer was denied by the town, the Silo's owners found themselves with a marketing conundrum. To restate Mark Twain's famous quip, the rumors of their closing have been greatly exaggerated.

"When word got out (about CVS), people thought we were closed. To this day, some people think that," said Mary Santorso, William's widow and mother of three grown children, who all work at the restaurant.

"Our tenants have moved out of the office building we own across the street. But we will stay on as a family and pick up the pieces."

One year before he died from a heart attack at the young age of 45, Mr. Santorso announced he was ready to move on. The long hours and hard work of running a restaurant for more than a decade had taken their toll and he wanted to step away from the day-to-day management responsibilities.

He turned to his son Gary, who was 10 years old when his father bought the business, and asked, "do you think you want to be in the restaurant business?"

Gary had grown up in the restaurant, doing whatever chores needed to be done.

At the time his father asked him about his interest in the business, Gary was finishing college and working in the roofing trade.

"When dad died, I got involved. I did not have a choice. I quit my job and started with bartending. I also worked as a dishwasher and cleaned toilets. I tried to learn how to operate the business," said the younger Mr. Santorso, who has been at it for almost three times as many years as his father.

His sisters also help out with the restaurant. Lee, the youngest of the three siblings, has office responsibilities and takes care of the bookkeeping. Susan is the head waitress and trains the wait staff as well as scheduling them. Mother sets the tone as the hostess and matriarch.

Her husband had owned a gas station in Forestville center before he came up with the plan to buy the restaurant from George and Ethel Foreman, its original owners. They had run the neighborhood eatery in the barn building with its distinctive silo for 18 years.

At first, Mr. Santorso partnered with Ralph Nocera, who had owned a barbershop across the street from his gas station. Their partnership dissolved after just two years and Mr. Nocera has since died.

The Foreman's family home was across the street from their restaurant and when the Santorsos bought the property, they converted it to office space, which had been fully leased until three years ago.

"The CVS project was denied in July or August of

The members of the Santorso family are Gary, the manager; Mary, mother and hostess; Susan, head waitress; and Lee, office manager and bookkeeper.



2006 and it had not been a done deal. So, for Christmas parties (for which people reserve space several months in advance), we did not book them because we did not know about the town's decision (until it became final)," Mr. Santorso explained.

His mother added, "we denied showers, because I thought, where would people go at the last minute if we closed?"

After 46 years serving food and providing a place for parties and business functions, the Silo restaurant still has a solid reputation for the quality of its food and its comfortable ambiance.

The large ground floor space is divided into several cozy rooms, with warm wood tones, paintings and fireplaces to add to the feeling of a family home.

The main dining room seats 100 and the bankers room seats about 110. There is also a large banquet area, lightened up by large windows, which is flexible enough to be divided into three rooms, based on the customer's needs.

"We have a bar like Cheers," said Mr. Santorso. "I am here every night after 5:00. Everyone knows everyone at the bar. I insult the regulars, all in fun."

In the early years, the restaurant gained a widespread reputation for the best baked stuffed shrimp, prepared by its first chef, who lived in Bristol.

According to Mr. Santorso, the restaurant built its popularity on this recipe and over the last 10 years he saw the business becoming busier and busier.

"Now it's like starting over. People forget about us, even though we have been here a long time. Maybe it's because there is more competition, with 10 restaurants in West Hartford just six miles away," he said.

Over the years, several corporations and professional associations have had their meetings at the Silo, and the restaurant's owners have supported local nonprofits by donating gift certificates for fund-raisers.

The local Rotary still meets there every Tuesday, as the group has for many years, but other longtime users have gone elsewhere.

Gary and Mary Santorso believe their food is as good as ever and they have the compliments of recent

as well as past diners to back them up.

They continue to serve Italian and American items, with familiar standards from their family background. Veal cutlet parmigiana and linguine with clam sauce are offered on the same menu with filet mignon and Dover sole almondine.

Seasonal favorites include roast duckling, Farmington cioppino and tilapia oreganato, among other delicious-sounding choices.

The side dishes illustrate the chef's attempt to keep the old favorites, but also to provide more updated choices, such as mashed sweet potatoes, roasted garlic mashed white potatoes and grilled asparagus, to mention a few.

The Silo is one of the few remaining places where tableside cooking is still available for items such as steak Diane.

"We have something of everything in our cuisine. We have always been consistently good with our food. No one could ever taste a chef change and we have had 10 over the years," said Mr. Santorso.

Now they are thinking about the future again. They had stopped investing in the business three years ago, when they thought the property would be purchased for redevelopment. But all the pieces which had brought them success in the past are still in place.

Mr. Santorso said none of the children in the next generation have expressed an interest in getting involved in the business, so he, his mother and his sisters will continue running the Silo as long as they are able. He points to the long hours, including weekends, as being unattractive to the younger family members.

"We've got to go forward," said Mrs. Santorso. "This past Saturday night, people said the food was consistent with the past, so we must be doing something right."

The Silo restaurant serves lunch Mondays through Fridays from 11:30 a.m. to 2 p.m., and dinner Mondays through Saturdays from 5 to 9 p.m.

It is open on Sundays only for special occasions for 50 or more guests. For reservations call 677-0149. **FL**

