



Angelo Saccameno (left) gave up a career at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange to bake bread with his family, including brother Jake. | JOHN H. WHITE~SUN-TIMES PHOTOS

BREAD WINNERS

CHICAGO ORIGINAL |
Family carries
on artisan baking
tradition

BY MICHAEL NAGRANT

On a Saturday night at 2 a.m., most 24-year-olds are probably slurping down one last drink in some neighborhood bar.

Angelo Saccameno, a Marquette University economics graduate who stands sentry over a 50-year-old brick floor oven, isn't like most 24-year-olds. For that matter, Angelo's father, Angelo Sr., his brother, Jake, and his mom, Pam, aren't like other families.

They don't have some rare genetic disease, nor are they reality television stars. Rather, in an age of mass commercialization, they've dedicated themselves to carrying on an 82-year-old artisan bread-baking tradition.

The roots of their business go back to San Vitaliano, an Italian village slightly north of Naples. That's where Salvatore Masi, founder of Italian Superior Bakery, which now stands at 933 S. Western, was born. It is also where he learned to bake fresh loaves in a community hearth, before he immigrated to New York and opened up his first bakery in Queens' Ozone Park neighborhood.

After the short stop in New York, Masi heard folks were making money in Chicago, so despite the protestations of his wife, who wanted him to go back to being a farmer, he set up shop at 915 S. Western in 1933 to serve the Tri-Taylor section of Little Italy. In 1940, he moved to the current location.

Through the '50s and '60s, Italian Superior Bakery was a port of entry for Italian immigrants to score hefty loaves of bread, crispy freselle, crunchy bread rings often dunked in soup, and taralle, a lemon oil-perfumed cookie.

Says Masi's son, Frank: "One of our customers said he had this pisan back in Italy, who told him when he came to America that his first stop should be our bakery. The guy settled in at Cumberland and Lawrence and headed straight over."

Demand was so great, customers were often allowed to buy only one or two loaves, and some fought over meager remains at the end of the day.

During this period, Frank Masi started to take over the business.

"There were 10 children, so we never had to hire anyone," he says.

And for almost another 60 years, Frank Masi worked 12 hours a day, seven days a week, through neighborhood upheaval and rejuvenation, to the point where he now says, "I can't even feel my fingers. I've got carpal tunnel."

While Frank was manning the stoves, Angelo Saccameno Sr. started coming in as a 3-year-old with his father almost every Sunday.

Though Angelo Sr. moved his family to LaGrange, the Sunday visits continued for his sons, Angelo Jr. and Jake.

Angelo Jr. remembers, "I was 4 or 5, and Frank told me to come in the back and lifted me up and let me look into the oven."

When Frank Masi retired and



At Italian Superior Bakery, baking begins as early as 1:30 a.m. some days. Here, loaves of French bread line the floor of the decades-old oven.



Pam Saccameno runs the retail side of the bakery. Her husband, Angelo Sr., and sons, Angelo Jr. and Jake, are the bakers.

closed up shop in 2007, the boys and Angelo Sr. felt like a part of them had died. Angelo Jr. was clerking at the Chicago Mercantile Exchange, but he also had his eye on running a food business, so he called Masi. He says, "You lose a part of yourself. If I'm feeling like this, there's got to be a thousand others like that."

Masi already had a couple of offers, but he thought of Jake and Angelo as grandsons. He had hoped to sell to another baker, and was slightly reluctant to pass it on to the Saccamenos because he wasn't sure they could learn to bake bread quickly. But, he says, "After a month or so these guys were phenomenal."

Masi still lives above the shop and

comes down every day to give his seal of approval. He's not unlike his father, who worked at the bakery until two days before he died.

"He [Salvatore] felt like I helped him when I was a kid and now he had to help me," Masi says. "At the end he wasn't taking care of himself, eating or shaving, but he still felt compelled to help me out when he was 83."

Angelo Sr. is the new Salvatore Masi. Though he holds down a full-time job as director of engineering for the Chicago Board Options Exchange, he comes in at 1:30 a.m. and puts in a full shift at the bakery before his other job.

His wife, Pam, drops in at 6:30 a.m. to run the retail side. She says, "This



Italian Superior Bakery, 933 S. Western, has been in business since the 1930s. Its previous owner still lives above the store and is a frequent customer.

is the only time in my life I wish I had more kids, so we had more people to run the bakery."

While the Saccamenos produce most of the same breads using the Masi's original recipes, they've experimented with the basic pizza, changing the sauce and adding new toppings. The pizza, with its crispy, sheet tray baked crust and toppings like sausage hunks or salty fresh ricotta, has become a mainline for the Saccamenos.

"We've had some people calling us at 3:30 a.m. on a Thursday asking if we've baked pizza yet," Jake Saccameno says. "We're like, 'Hey buddy, shouldn't you be in bed?'"

While the pizza is different, the bakery is pretty much the same as it was 70 years ago. The wooden floorboards have been worn within a millimeter of their life and can't be resanded without breaking. Dough rises in 90-year-old wooden boxes bur-

nished with the oils from generations of bakers' hands.

The Saccamenos don't expect to change much, though there is one legacy that might be modified. There is a depression cut into the floor in front of the ovens so that the 6-foot-tall Masi brothers could see bread baking without stooping over.

Angelo Jr., who is 5-foot-6, says he's almost broken an ankle stepping into the hole, and plans to raise the floor.

Minor nuisances aside, the Saccameno family is committed to carrying on the Masi family tradition for a few more generations and feel like they're living a dream.

"Frank showed me the oven as a 4-year-old. Now, 20 years later I'm working that same oven," Angelo Jr. says. "It's so surreal."

Italian Superior Bakery is at 933 S. Western, (312) 733-5092.

Michael Nagrant is a Chicago freelance writer.