

DESIGN | URBAN PLANNING

## The Drive to Succeed —The Renaissance in Vancouver's Little Italy

THE AREA STRETCHING a few blocks on either side of 1st Avenue along Vancouver's Commercial Drive has earned its contemporary reputation as "the Drive" for being one of the city's most colourful neighbourhoods—a diverse melting pot that seems to attract every segment of society. But for the three decades that followed the Second World War, Commercial Drive had a distinctive Italian flavour to it. It was the cultural and commercial hub for a sizable population of Italian immigrants who settled in Vancouver's east side. By the mid-1980s, however, the influx of

Italians, and their cultural influence, began to fade.

Today, a local renaissance is shaping Vancouver's Little Italy, with a new generation of businesses offering authentic Italian cultural and culinary traditions with modern flair. The second and third generations of Vancouver's original Italian immigrants have not only succeeded their parents and grandparents in taking over and re-energizing long-established Commercial Drive family businesses; many have started new ventures that reinforce the area's attractiveness as

a destination that offers an authentically Italian cultural experience. At last count, Commercial Drive's Little Italy boasts at least six coffee bars, seven restaurants, two delis, a bakery, a couple of tailors, a travel agency and several other shops that can all claim to be of authentic Italian heritage.

Carmen D'Onofrio credits the Drive's recent transformation to local ownership. The president of the Commercial Drive Business Improvement Association says the strong foothold that family-owned businesses have always had in the area has made it difficult for retail chains to dominate. Many of the Drive's commercial properties are owned by the business operators themselves or by local landlords instead of corporate owners.

"While the Drive is a slightly more edgy neighbourhood, there is a richness that comes from the authenticity of the area's cultural heritage," says D'Onofrio, whose family owns two Commercial Drive businesses. "There's an endearing character, and despite change in the area, that character has always remained strong."

D'Onofrio's late father, Carmine, an Italian immigrant, and his mother, Isa, married in 1967 and travelled to Italy for their honeymoon. That summer honeymoon turned into their first buying trip. They arrived back in Vancouver with a load of fine Italian-made shoes and immediately opened Kalena's Shoes on Commercial Drive. Over the years, Kalena's has had several secondary locations throughout the city but the Commercial Drive store has always been considered home. D'Onofrio's brother Robert and sister Veralea operate the shoe store today.

D'Onofrio is a Stanford University graduate and former professional soccer player. For 10 years he played in Italy, on Canada's Olympic



FROM LEFT: *Continental Coffee at Commercial Drive and 2nd Avenue; Players and spectators at the Victoria Park bocce courts; Delicacies seen in a shop window along Commercial Drive.*

team and with the Vancouver 86ers. In 2001, he returned home to Vancouver to help with the family businesses after his father was diagnosed with cancer. Today, he operates Stile Wines, an importer and marketer of premium wines.

"My dad was the biggest fan and promoter of Italian culture, lifestyle, design, food and wine. He started the wine importing business when he realized the wide range of Italian wines that weren't available in Canada, and particularly in Western Canada," D'Onofrio explains. "For instance, we introduced prosecco to Western Canada."

Since taking over the wine business, D'Onofrio has often wondered how practical it is to have his office located on the Drive, with limited parking, a small office and other limitations. But in the same thought, he realizes his clients love visiting his offices here. He smiles and says, "I don't even have a coffee machine in my office. Everyone who comes here wants to go to one of the many coffee bars or they want to enjoy a meal here. You can't replicate the energy and the authenticity that is the Drive."

The Grippo family is another family that has been living and operating businesses in the Commercial Drive neighbourhood for generations, now spanning more than 80 years. Ted Grippo's grandfather operated a cartage business in the area, and in the early 1960s he established Commercial Drive's first coffee-roasting business, Continental Coffee, a popular coffee house that is still operated by his daughter and two grandsons at the corner of 2nd Avenue and Commercial.

Ted Grippo himself has embraced the authentic approach to business he learned from his family, with his two ventures on Commercial Drive, Gelateria Dolce Amore and DiVino Wine Bar & Tasting Room. The family-owned building that houses the

two new businesses was once the location of Grippo TV, a home electronics business established by his father in 1959. "The quality we are striving to offer is based on the artisan approach—simple, fresh offerings prepared with care."

Grippo explains that strong Italian culture in the Commercial Drive neighbourhood has influenced his appreciation for authentic things. "I remember my grandmother and her wood stove in the family home on Graveley Street. She used to prepare some amazingly beautiful meals—simple and hearty food—using fresh ingredients, many from her own backyard garden. Home-cooked, wholesome food. Locally produced goods made by artisans and craftsmen. Timeless traditions, like business done with a handshake and regular gatherings of family and friends as our main social activity—these are the things that create character."

As Carmen D'Onofrio says, "This area really is the pulse of Vancouver. If something happens in Vancouver, it usually happens on the Drive first. It's Vancouver's expressive edge and cutting edge."

—Bob Ransford

