

Family ties

Elena Faita, owner of Dante and Mezza Luna, has become a culinary icon in Montreal and her son Stefano is poised to carry on the family legacy

By Laurie O'Halloran

Retailing has never been a one-dimensional career. As most store owners know, the job requires the wearing of many hats, from buyer to accountant to merchandise designer to customer service. In the housewares industry, you can often add chef to that list. And in that regard, nobody is able to multi-task more effectively than Elena Faita. With a big heart, an incredible

work ethic, and boundless energy, the owner of Dante Hardware (along with brother Rudy) and Mezza Luna cooking school, is also a full-time cooking instructor, cookware importer, restaurateur and local television personality.

She often works up to 80 hours a week, and shows no sign of slowing down, despite the fact that she's 65 years old. That's because Elena loves her life just the way it is. She's passionate about her businesses, crazy about

her customers, and is living the life many immigrants can only dream about when they come to Canada.

Born in Italy, just outside of Rome, Elena came to Canada in 1954 at the age of 6, along with her mother, Teresa, and three siblings. Her father, Luigi Venditelli, had come over in 1952 looking for work in construction in Montreal, where his brother-in-law Rafaele had settled.

It took two years for him to save the money to send for the rest of his family,

Elena Faita in the kitchen with Stefano.



Specialty Retail Profile: Dante



The building that houses Dante and Mezza Luna is owned by Elena and her family. Positioned on a corner intersection in the Little Italy section of Montreal, it also has several apartments with balconies.

store and buy a tomato machine so they can make a nice pasta sauce’.”

Most people took her advice. The sales recovered and soon they were making a profit. Though neither Luigi or Teresa ever worked in the store, they were an integral part of its growth.

Elena started working at Dante with her older brothers when she was just 14, followed by her sister Maria and younger brother Rudy. Though she was a bright student who earned good grades and loved school, Elena was also a devoted daughter and did what she was told.

“We were immigrants,” Elena explains. “We had to help each other and we were taught that without hard work, we’d never get ahead.”

So for the next seven years, Elena worked all day and attended school at night, following the example set by her parents and older brothers. Her father rose each morning at 4 a.m. and put in a 12-hour day on the construction site. Her mother would be at the market at dawn. The store was their family business – and their future. One exception was Elena’s oldest brother, Guiseppe, a talented opera singer who studied music at McGill while he was also working at the store. When he won a scholarship to the music conservatory in Milan, Italy, Elena and Antonio happily bought his share of the business.

Under Antonio’s management, sales grew steadily in the ‘70s. The store carried everything from pasta makers to C.I.L. paint and Olivetti typewriters. When male customers started asking for more hunting equipment, Antonio expanded the hardware section to include a wide range of guns and rifles. Gradually, they started to physically separate the store’s merchandise into two distinct sections, one focused on kitchen and the other devoted to hunting equipment. In time, youngest brother Rudy, who had a

and the children were not thrilled to see so much snow when their ship docked in Halifax that spring. Their attitude changed on the train ride to Montreal, however, when Elena and her siblings, Maria, Antonio and Guiseppe tasted white Wonder Bread for the first time – and decided Canada might not be so bad after all.

By the time they arrived in Montreal, Uncle Rafaele’s hardware store, called La Ferramente Dante, was well-known in the city’s burgeoning Little Italy district. Located near the popular Jean Talon farmer’s market, it catered to European immigrants, offering everything for the construction trade as well as housewares and assorted cooking utensils ‘from the old country’ such as pasta machines and tomato grinders.

Two more sons were born after the Vendittelli family arrived in Canada, and although she had six children to

care for, Teresa supplemented the family income by working long hours in the farmer’s market. Ambitious and hard-working, she was also an exceptional cook who eagerly passed on her skills to her children.

Rafaele decided to focus on a new hotel venture in 1955 and a year later, he sold the hardware store to Luigi and his two older sons. It helped that the two of them were already running the store on a daily basis. Unfortunately, they soon discovered the business wasn’t as financially-sound as they thought, but they weren’t worried. Like most immigrants in those days, they believed that with hard work and determination they would succeed.

“My mother was a fantastic woman,” says Elena. “She would sell flowers and vegetable seeds in the spring, and in the fall she would sell the fresh produce, reminding each customer to ‘go to Dante’s

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degree in commerce from Concordia University, took over the running of the hardware section.

Over the next two decades, Dante became a landmark in Little Italy and customers flocked to the store. In 1970, Elena got married at age 24 (which she says is practically an old maid for an Italian!). She met her husband, a fellow Montrealer, on a family holiday in New Jersey in 1968. By that time, she was working long hours at Dante every day, as well as handling the finances, but she loved every minute of it, especially working with her siblings.

Her daughter Cristina arrived in 1971, followed by son Stefano in 1975. It didn't slow Elena down one bit.

Maria returned to Montreal to help her sister and brother in the store in 1973. When the big box stores like Home Depot arrived in the 1980s, Dante reduced the size of its hardware department and started to offer even more kitchenware.

In 1979, the recession hit. At the same time, Elena's older brother Antonio decided he wanted out of the family business. In 1980, he sold his share to Elena, Maria and Rudy. Even though interest rates hovered around 26%, Teresa decided it was also time to buy the building that housed the 2,000-square-foot store. It included several apartments and space for future expansion, and she generously put it in the names of her hard-working children as a gift.

Known for her tips on cooking and

recipes, Elena decided to start exhibiting at consumer home shows. A tiny woman with a big personality, people were naturally drawn to her.

As business at the store grew steadily, so did Elena's reputation as a demonstrator. A natural teacher, she inherited her mother's work ethic as well as her cooking skills. (She's also fluent in three languages, Italian, English and French, as are both of her children.) Yet she was determined to provide Cristina and Stefano with the educational opportunities she didn't have.

"I didn't want my kids working in the store because I knew it was a hard business," she says. "You have to work 60 or 70 hours a week. Our generation did it because we had to. I did it because I loved it. But I wanted them to get a good education, I wanted them to go out and make their way in the world."

Though Stefano's marks were "up and down", according to Elena, her daughter was an A student who graduated from McGill with a degree in marketing and languages. After graduation she insisted on working in the store because she saw a bright future for the business. Determined and hard-working like her mother, she had big ideas to take the store to the next level.

In 1989, Cristina came on board and starting working the trade shows with her mother. She also started meeting with suppliers, researching new products and identifying the latest trends in kitchenware. Though Elena and Rudy

The store is stocked to overflowing, with an emphasis on quality plus function. Daughter Cristina convinced her mother to upgrade when she joined in 1989.

were very happy with her sales at the time, Cristina thought they could do even better – and she set out to prove it.

First, she decided to upgrade all the merchandise. After her first trip to the Chicago housewares show, she changed the product assortment and added more high end brands such as Le Creuset, Cuisipro and Swissmar. She also changed the look of the store to make it more appealing to younger consumers. Sales started to rise accordingly.

The next step was to rent a 10 x 10-foot booth at Montreal's largest consumer home show. Over 300,000 people attend the show and Cristina was confident her mother's pasta-making skills would wow the crowd. And she was right. For 10 straight days, Elena spent 15 hours a day making pasta in the little booth, and she never stopped smiling. It was the first time, she says, that she realized she really had talent.

"I never really thought I was a great cook," she says. "But I had always enjoyed cooking for my family, using my own and my mother's recipes. I would always make a nice supper for my family on the table every evening after work. Sundays were spent making minestrone soup for the week ahead, or canning vegetables from my garden."

Her success at the Montreal show at-

Specialty Retail Profile: Dante



Elena's brother Rudy runs the hardware section of the store, which is well stocked with rifles and hunting supplies.

tracted local media as well as new customers for Dante. One Quebec magazine even did a feature article on Elena and that convinced her – at Cristina's urging – to start doing pasta-making demos in the store every Saturday.

After several months watching customers flock to the demos, asking for recipes and advice, Cristina wisely decided it was time for them to open a cooking school. Elena wasn't so sure, but because they now owned the entire building, there was a space that could be converted right next to the store.

They secured the proper permits, bought a commercial stove and refurbished the 1,500-square-foot space to accommodate a full demo kitchen. They called the school Mezza Luna, which is Italian for 'half moon' and also the name of the knife with a double curved blade that is one of Elena's favourite tools.

It opened in 1991 to great fanfare. Cristina did all the promotion and student bookings while Elena, who was interviewed for several TV segments and magazines, taught all the cooking classes – after working a full day in the store!

For the first few months, there would be five or six students at each class. But as word of Elena's talent got out, the numbers increased, and she started to bring in guest chefs from local restaurants to add a different flavour to the lessons. She's also had visits from star chefs such as Anthony Bourdain.

Cristina stayed with the school for

five years, then she fell in love with an Italian while attending a trade show in Milan. In 2000, she moved to Italy to be with him. The timing was opportune. Her brother Stefano had recently graduated with a degree in graphic design – and a desire to get more involved in the business. He had always helped out in the store, but now he was helping the chefs (and his mother) at Mezza Luna, learning a great deal about cooking techniques along the way.

One of the chefs who was a regular at the school in its early days was Martin Picard. Elena taught him the Italian way, he taught her the French way (and also dated her daughter for a while). An innovative and ambitious chef, he had always wanted to start his own restaurant, and Elena was eager to invest, along with a local doctor who had taken their classes. In 1992, they opened Au Pied de Cochon. It's now one of Montreal's top-ranked restaurants in a city that's famous for its food. Both Elena and Martin have become culinary icons and well-known personalities in Montreal and beyond.

To date, over 7,000 students have passed through the doors of Mezza

Luna, many returning over and over. The school operates 10 months of the year, and Elena has a cooking class at least five nights a week. Classes are sold out months in advance and waiting lists are the norm.

She is used to working 70 hours a week and only takes a break twice a year to visit her daughter and grandchildren in Fabriano, Italy. Elena also often takes Mezza Luna students with her to Europe for a cooking tour, in addition to making regular appearances on local T.V. cooking programs.

In 2006, the illustrious magazine *Gourmet* visited Dante and did a six-page article on Elena and Rudy. It remains one of the highlights of her career.

Of course, Dante has reaped the rewards of Mezza Luna's success as loyal students eagerly buy up everything needed to prepare Elena's mouth-watering recipes. In response to demand for more Italian-made products, she even sources her own line of cookware.

Son Stefano, an accomplished chef in his own right, has embarked on an ambitious career. With an enthusiasm to match his mother's, he often teaches in the school and currently hosts his own

For Elena Faita, charity begins at the store

Elena Faita understands that, in life and in business, you get what you give. Giving back to her community has always been an important part of her philosophy. Consider the following story from George Winkler of G.W.Sales.

"Several years ago I wanted to create a promotion for the Microplane zester with a pink handle in order to generate money for breast cancer research. It wasn't easy to put this all together. Microplane had to agree to lower the minimum orders for a special colour – which is usually 5000 pieces – down to 2000. This is still a large amount for a relatively small store. I ran into Elena and her son Stefano at the airport in Montreal while waiting for our flight to the Chicago housewares show. I mentioned my idea and Elena immediately wanted to get involved.

Elena and I met to work out the details. A few months later, we were on our way. Through the promotion, the Breast Cancer Research Foundation in Quebec received a donation of \$12,500. Of that amount, Microplane and I donated \$2,500. The \$10,000 balance came from Dante. Elena donated \$4 per unit sold and still sold it below the regular suggested retail price. That donation came right from her pocket.

I watched women come into her store and buy several units, even though some already owned a Microplane. Elena is a very special lady who is admired by her customers and is a leader in her community. They were happy to support her. We even had a famous Quebec chef write an article about the promotion."

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cooking show, *In the Kitchen With Stefano Faita*, on CBC (see sidebar story).

Her commitment to customer service is legendary, but Elena is also proud of the relationship she enjoys with her long-term suppliers. Sales agent George Winkler has been selling to her for 25 years, and is one of her biggest fans.

"Elena runs one of the most successful housewares stores in Montreal yet she is exactly the same person today as she was when she started," says George. "She doesn't have to work six days a week, but she does. She doesn't have to help her staff open boxes and price orders when they come in, but she does. The personal service that she and her

staff provide is first class. When customers come in, they always buy something, and Elena will provide a free recipe, or tips on cooking or caring for their purchases. It's apparent to everyone she meets that she loves her job."

Frank Sasse at Swissmar, who has known Elena for two decades, concurs. "Elena is one of the most consistent and innovative retailers in my territory," he says. "She buys quality and she focuses on functionality. This, together with her knowledge of her customer base, makes her very successful – and a pleasure to deal with."

Since 1956, Elena has likely sold more tomato machines than anyone else in

the country. Many of those were supplied by Adamo Imports. "We have been working with Dante since 1986," says Anthony Adamo. "I believe the key to her success is the one-on-one relationship she has with customers in the store and school. Her clients trust her opinion on cooking products and techniques."

Elena now lives with her recently retired husband, Matthew, in a condo just two minutes from Dante, which means she can walk to work every day. Incredibly, she had both hips replaced in 2009 but was up and around in just three weeks. Her success has much to do with that energy level, but Elena claims it's because she's so well organized. "After all," she explains with a laugh, "I'm a Virgo."

Her staff are certainly well trained, but it's always Elena that people want to see when they visit the store. And it's the feedback she gets from those people that keeps her motivated.

In four years, the store will celebrate its 60th anniversary and Elena hopes to publish a book with her brother Rudy about Dante and its history. She's also been approached to do a new English cooking show on T.V. And Mezza Luna's cooking classes for the next few months are sold out, as usual.

Will she ever want to step out of the limelight and take it easy? It's unlikely. Elena knows that, at least for now, the store still needs her. And it's not easy to find good staff (though the store employs six people in hunting and six in kitchenware.)

"I don't understand some young people today," she says. "They don't want to work as hard as I do. It's frustrating."

Elena's hope for the future of Dante rests with her son. She believes he will take over the business one day. "I watch Stefano when he interacts with the customers in the store. They love his enthusiasm, they adore him," she says.

Why wouldn't they? He's exactly like his mother. ☺

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Stefano Faita: The rising star in the family

As charming and talented as his mother, Stefano has taken the family's traditions and rich food history and turned it into a successful career as a celebrity chef. He has two French cooking programs and three best-selling cookbooks. He has just finished filming 90 new episodes in Toronto for the third season of his show *In The Kitchen With Stefano Faita*. Shown daily at 3:30 p.m. on CBC, the program is the only Canadian cooking show that's filmed in front of a live studio audience.

On the show, Stefano offers a warm, inviting atmosphere and encourages viewers to cook with creativity and passion. Like his mother Elena, he has had no formal culinary training. Instead, he learned simply by observation. "When we opened the cooking school, I used to be my mother's assistant," he says. "Then when we started bringing in guest chefs, I would help them. I was fortunate to learn cooking techniques from a lot of great masters."

Despite his national success and hectic schedule, Stefano insists the store is still his main priority. He has worked there on and off for 15 years, almost half of his life.

He has always been inspired by his mother, and says the most important lesson he has learned from her is that "you never get something for nothing". Stefano understands you have to earn everything in life. It's the way his mother was raised and he believes she will probably never stop working. "She thrives on it," he says. "She's got boundless energy."

Stefano hopes to run Dante and Mezza Luna himself one day. Though he doesn't have as much time to spare now that he has two young daughters, he still loves working in the store. As he explains: "Standing in the store on a sunny Saturday morning, watching the customers shopping and talking, there is nothing better. I love the energy. It's heaven."

