



BOB LUCKEY/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHY

Cashier Belkis Zepeda, left, rings up an order for customer Joe Della, of Stamford, as he buys items at Giovanni's Country Market & Meat Market in North Stamford last Monday.

Country store in the city

Market makes attracting loyal customers a specialty

By Martin B. Cassidy
STAFF WRITER

STAMFORD — At first sight, Giovanni's Country Market & Meat Market is not overly busy on the Monday morning before Christmas, as Tommy LaRocca double-checks a \$1,000 last-minute order of party platters piled with vegetables and dip, sandwiches, antipasti, meatballs and ribs.

But every few minutes, another phone call comes in, usually for LaRocca, to check details on other upcoming catering orders for holiday shindigs.

"We're starting to feel the pressure, but we're getting everything done," the 34-year-old grocer said. "But it's good to be busy. Thank God for the holidays."

With a staff of 15 people working through the holidays, Giovanni's on Old Long Ridge Road was hustling last week to keep up during one of the store's peak seasons, catering a dozen office parties a day and providing holiday customers with special cuts of filet mignon, lamb and veal osso bucco, LaRocca said.

The store was relatively calm that Monday morning, but it had been jampacked before the previous weekend's snowstorm, being the only market north of the Merritt Parkway for some 5 miles, according to LaRocca.

A wall near the kitchen is plastered with blue and white receipts filled with orders for cold cut and cheese platters and holiday cookies, as well as fully prepared ham and turkey dinners.

Still, LaRocca said running a smaller, family-owned grocery store is a niche business. The LaRocca clan works year-

round to hold on to a loyal customer base by emphasizing the importance of the personal touch, having a top-notch meat counter and maintaining the store's position as a specialty market for finicky aficionados.

"We can't compete with all the big chains, but we've found our place," LaRocca said. "People will make special trips from New Canaan, Darien and Greenwich to buy a product that we carry."

Larry Jerue, the meat counter manager, said that the store's meat and fish department offers the increasingly rare combination of experienced butchers and top-quality meats.

The store's fish is delivered daily from the Fulton Fish Market in New York, and all beef steaks and chops are certified Angus beef.

The store also produces its own Italian sausages, as well as the more than 30 salads at its deli counter.

"We have the best quality meats you can get," Jerue said. "I'm old school, and I know how to break down cattle. These are skills that the newer guys will probably never learn."

Mickey Berkowitz, 52, a Long Ridge area resident, said he regularly shops at the store because

it carries a wide assortment of high-quality food, including Dr. Brown's sodas, which are not available at many other markets.

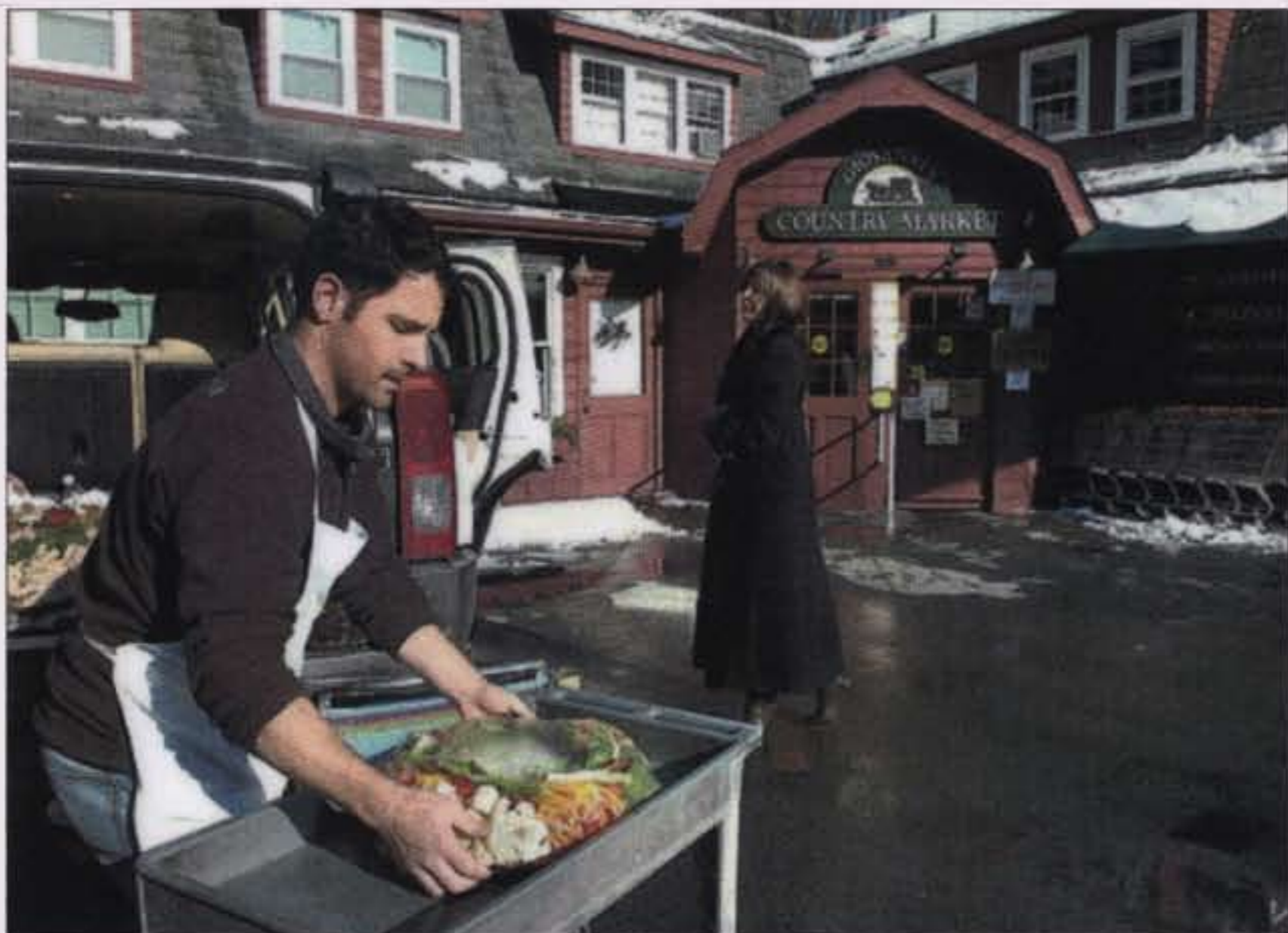
"They have things you can't get at a regular supermarket," Berkowitz said. "It's fantastic for the people in the Ridges to have this store here."

In a typical week, LaRocca deals with about 150 different vendors to keep the store stocked with specialty foods. Some



CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

A 1930s photo of the grocery store that is now the location of Giovanni's Country Market & Meat Market at 105 Old Long Ridge Road.



Tommy LaRocca loads a platter of cold cuts into the vehicle of customer Tara Guastella, right.



Wilton brand Wave Hill Breads is available at Giovanni's.



EDITOR'S NOTE: The Dart is a weekly feature in which staff members throw a dart at a map and seek out a story near where it lands. This week, The Dart brought us to Giovanni's Country Market & Meat Market in North Stamford.

"Our focus on specialty foods is what makes us different," LaRocca said. "We can't compete with the largest grocery stores and big chains, so we carry specialty foods that no one else does."

LaRocca runs the store with his father, Tom LaRocca, who came to the United States from Avellino, Italy, 40 years ago.

The elder LaRocca said he values the store's history and relationship with customers.

"We appreciate our customers and know them on a personal basis," he said. "If you come here, we know who you are and what you like."

Mountain Wood Road resident Peggy Brewer said Giovanni's top two strengths are its meat counter, which provides especially fresh products, and the fact that the store carries her favorite bread, Wave Hill, a Wilton brand that is becoming more popular.

"I love having the store nearby, and it is very handy," Brewer said. "I won't buy meat anywhere else. They cut it to order."

The store recently launched a Web site, giovanniscountrymarket.com, where customers can learn about specials and access menus and other information.



Handmade signs announce various specials and holiday deadlines on the market's front door.