

Growing Together: Caruso & Company celebrates 100th anniversary



By Brock Weir

The hardwood floors, exposed brick and tin ceilings at Caruso & Company, a mainstay on Aurora's main drag, can make shoppers almost feel like they have stepped back in time.

The feeling continues deeper into the store in the back office, the nerve centre of the operation; but a quick 'ka-ching!' from the nearby computer quickly followed by a printout of the web order just received brings one back to reality and underscores just how long they have been here.

As Aurora celebrates its first 150 years, a full century has been shared with Caruso's. What started off as a grocery store opened by the Caruso family in 1913 has served as a grocery store, a wholesale grocery business, a flower shop under the name of 'Mary's Flowers', and still sells flowers and now home décor items back under the Caruso name.

When he was a kid, Mike Caruso did his bit helping around the family business, but when the time came to find a career path, maintaining the store (founded by his grandfather and Mary was his aunt) was the last thing on his mind, but once his own parents decided to retire in 1997, he was ready to move out of general carpentry and back to his roots.

'I was ready for a change, I jumped in and away we went!' he says.

From his work in contracting and carpentry he worked with Sue Wilbur to infuse his design sense into the business alongside the blooms.

Maintaining their loyal and long-time customer base and the services people have come to expect is one thing, but making sure these needs are met while also keeping up with the times and changing tastes have ensured their survival in a rapidly changing and growing town.

'You just have to stay at it and keep it current,' he says. 'You can't just sit back and hope for the best.'

Mike and Sue focus primarily on the home décor items while they have a team of designers with full creative control over the flowers and arrangements. They pride themselves on their loyal clientele in Aurora, King, and Newmarket, and the number of customers who make it a point to come in in person.

'We're a destination,' says Mr. Caruso. 'That is what we work with and that is what we try to play to. We could never move to a strip mall or plaza. I don't think we would have this business anywhere else. In fact, we couldn't have this business anywhere else. The building, the location, everything is what it is. We're excited about the restaurant up the street coming in and that is going to

bring in more people, but there isn't a ton of stuff down here but a handful of stores.?

The restaurant Mr. Caruso refers to is Aw Shucks!, the popular seafood restaurant which plans to move into the former site of Thompson's Furniture this fall. While they too hope to make a success of their new venture, where Caruso's has succeeded in Downtown Aurora others have failed.

?There has been tons of talk about [revitalizing] the downtown core in the past 15 years,? he says. ?I got involved in different meetings for revitalizing the downtown 15 years ago and nothing has changed. It is just such a huge project but it seems hard to get so many people on board. There are so many diverse businesses and mindsets and to get everyone to come together on the common goal is easier said than done.?

In the meantime, they have focused on their customers and building their web presence. Mike and Sue say they receive a lot of web orders along with the more traditional orders by phone, but more and more people are phoning them up intrigued by what they see online. The website, they said, is not only available for ordering but seems to also be serving as a ?brochure? for their business.

While the website might seem like a brochure ? and indeed it does have special branding to commemorate their milestone anniversary this year ? Mr. Caruso and Ms. Wilbur are almost downplaying their anniversary.

They are not likely, they say, to set off fireworks in a grand display of commemoration other than a small exhibit in the works at the Aurora Cultural Centre this fall and perhaps a little extra oomph at their regular November open house.

?We get a lot of people who come in and say they remember coming in as a kid and remember this as the place to come to,? says Mr. Caruso. ?We still have a lot of walk-in traffic. This is still a see-touch-feel business.?