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The Sendik Legacy

Since 1926, the family of Sicilian immigrants has been Milwaukee's favorite green grocers. This is their story.

From the 1930s to the 1960s, Tony Sendik's Market sold asparagus and watercress to Milwaukee's "Old Family" elite: the Uihleins, Brumders, Harnischfegers, Trostels, whose imposing homes lined Lake Drive, Wahl, Prospect and Highland avenues. At one time, the store had 10 Uihlein charge accounts; the Schlitz Brewing family craved the freshest vegetables for their soups and salads.

Limousines lined up outside the Sendik's store and inside, mink coats abounded. Milwaukee's industrial barons had acquired the tastes of the continental elite on their trips to Europe and Sendik's satisfied their desires.

But even then, there were many customers who weren't as wealthy. "Don't forget, for everyone who's Mrs. Uihlein, there are 10 who aren't!" was a saying of Tony Sendik. And today, with the flight of Milwaukee's old families to River Hills, Fox Point and Mequon, that adage is truer than ever. With the emergence of a health-conscious middle class, it's not just the Uihleins who want asparagus. "Everybody's eating it," says Tony's grandson John, who now oversees the store with his brother Tony.

For a vast range of Milwaukeeans, the Sendik name evokes images of vegetables, neatly stacked and gleaming, and rows of shining fruit. It recalls memories of beautifully cut holiday roasts and friendly clerks and shopping trips and family.

Since 1926, when young Sicilian immigrant Tony Balistreri opened his first market under the Sendik's name, the store has been an anchor for this city. Seven decades, three generations, one Depression, a World War and some family disagreements later, the Balistreris known as Sendik still sell produce to Milwaukee. The remarkable success of this family-run business tells the story of an immigrant family's dramatic rise. It speaks of the shifting social strata of our country in this century. It tells of traditions and transformation on Milwaukee's East Side.

Three stores now bear the Sendik name—one on Downer, one on Oakland, one on Silver Spring; only the Downer and Silver Spring stores are still run by family. All three markets are excellent and have their champions. But it is Tony Sendik's Market on Downer that conjures up, for most Milwaukeeans, the essence of the tradition and quality we have come to associate with the name.

Most family histories have a central character viewed as the great progenitor. In this branch of the Balistreri family it is Tony. Fifteen-year-old Antonino Balistreri sailed with Godfather George and his brother Ignatius on the Conte de Savoia from Palermo to New York City in 1922. On arrival in Milwaukee, he discovered he was too young to work in the macaroni factory as he'd planned. Seven weeks short of his 16th birthday, the U.S. Child Labor Laws stood in his way. So he button-holed an interpreter, went to the produce market, bought some peaches and started peddling, in the steps of his Godfather George.

After his 16th birthday, he worked briefly on the railroad... but soon returned to peddling. In 1924, he took over the retiring George's customers and continued to build his route, traveling back and forth across Milwaukee. He was able to buy himself a brand-new R.E.O. Speed Wagon as he developed relationships with influential Milwaukee households and businesses.

One early triumph was the Surf Hotel, on prestigious Prospect Avenue. In this breakthrough deal, he sold the manager 150 tomatoes, three cases of potatoes and 15 cases of cantaloupe. "I never buy from peddlers," she is said to have told Tony, "but you're working hard, so I'll try you. But if you cheat me once, I'll never buy again."

Young Tony was so successful, his clients eventually encouraged him to open a store—which he did, in 1926. As for why he called the store Sendik's, this has become the stuff of local lore. The name comes not from Tony, but from his father, Salvatore. After many trips between Palermo and Milwaukee, Salvatore actually settled in this city after his son had. The Italian-speaking immigrant picked out a stove to buy and asked the salesman to "send it" on. Misunderstanding his broken English, the salesman wrote the form up to be delivered to a certain "Sendik."

Apocryphal or not, this story has engraved itself permanently in the communal imagination. Sendik's was the name Tony chose for his store, which stood on the southeast corner of Capital and Oakland—the site of the current North Shore Bank. Several years later, Tony opened a second store, renting the current site on Downer, where they have been in continuous operation since July 4, 1929, four months before the start of the Depression.

The Depression hit members of the Balistreri family as hard as it hit most everyone— young Tony less so, since he was self-employed. Father, brothers, all joined Tony in the store. "As they lost their jobs, they all came together; they all became one," according to John Balistreri Sendik, fourth-generation family member from Sendik's on Downer. "There were nine men living in one house. If one brother made it, everyone ate off the same check." (Women and children were still waiting in Italy.)

Despite hard times, the two stores thrived, but Tony was stricken by crippling arthritis in the '30s, which sent him back to warmer Sicily for periods of time. In his absence, Brothers Tom, Frank, Ignatius and Joe actively ran the stores, and eventually bought the land where the current store stands at 4027 N. Oakland. In the 1940s, family members changed their names legally to Sendik to associate themselves more closely with the store.

Family businesses are notoriously hard to keep together, especially past the second generation, and the Sendiks had their problems getting along. Through time, the stores grew more separate, the brothers' businesses more independent. Tom later bought the property on Silver Spring, eventually running it with his sons, Ted and Tom. Ignatius and his sons Ted and Steve owned and ran the store on Oakland. (Five brothers named their first sons after grandfather Salvatore; the nickname for Salvatore is "Ted.")

The splits came because "it was too crowded. Too small a piece to split in three ways," John Sendik says. "Someone would end up hungry." Eventually, Tom, Frank, Ignatius, and Joe changed their families' names back again to Balistreri! Only Tony's family, who stayed at Downer, kept the Sendik name.

Today John Balistreri Sendik is 37, Tony 38, and Sal, semi-retired, is 63. "Our titles? Formal or informal?" John's eyes are twinkling. "My brother Tony and I are vice presidents. My dad is president. We're all three owners. But my dad's not around much anymore—and when he is, he's like the old dominating Sicilian!"

John's angelic look—curly, fair hair and green eyes—give little clue to his Sicilian background. His joking, charming manner, however, does not rule out a firm managerial style, in line with his father, Sal, and grandfather, Tony, the patriarch, now deceased. There is no question that John shares their fierce passion for the store.

This past summer, one final business separation occurred. Ted and Steve sold their Oakland store and their Sendik's name. The store's proprietor, John Nehring, had been an employee at the Downer store and a customer favorite in their wine department for several years. For John Sendik and his father, the sale felt like a betrayal.

"They sold the name Sendik to Piggly Wiggly, out of Sheboygan. And they took my man who was running my wine department to run it," John says. Nehring denies this, saying that he is the true owner of the Oakland store, and that Piggly Wiggly is simply a supplier. A recent story in *Milwaukee Magazine* also says that Piggly Wiggy co-signed a loan Nehring used to buy the store.

Sendik says he does not begrudge a former employee's leaving. "A lot of people who have worked here have gone on into business for themselves, to manage some other operation. It's considered that if someone works for my family, they can work anywhere."

We sit in the little glassed-in office behind the store, where family has written payroll, counted receipts, overseen business for decades. "See, the issue is not someone working for me trying to better themselves," John Sendik continues. What caused the bitterness, he says, was this: "My dad's cousins were negotiating with my man for a year without me knowing it. My dad was very hurt. Because he's older, he has more pride than I do—he never thought that any of the family would have sold the name. There is a lot of pride associated with the name—it was built up from nothing! That was hard for us to swallow."

If you listen closely to regular customers of Sendik's, they talk about it like they talk about family. "It's like the village well in the middle of central square," says Nici Teweles, a customer since the 1950s. "I love that men shop there... you can see them buying flowers on Friday afternoons. And the staff—of course, I have known John since he was a boy. Then there was Chris—she was in the flowers, she was such a fixture. Sal is very good and Grandpa was funny; he'd like to tease. I'd always ask him to pick out a ripe, honeydew melon for me and he'd say, "There's some honeys that do and some honeys that don't."

Grandpa Tony's maxim was that "the store will treat you well, if you treat it well." That wisdom seems to be in his offspring's blood—as is the same loyalty to the business. Tony, Sal, John, Tony II, and sister MeriJo (and her fiancé John Cornell) have contributed their life's blood to the store. As did Tony's wife, Marie, now retired, who counted the money and wrote checks in the little back office for 65 years. John, though now a resident of Fox Point who sends his children to University School, displays no sense of entitlement, no assumption of success. Treat the business as if it is a living

thing. Feed it, it will feed you. Neglect it, you will fail.

Since the flight of the city's affluent to the suburbs, one might expect that the East Side store that once sold them watercress would suffer. What's more, there are now other stores beginning to sell the products Sendik's offers—Kohl's, PDQ, Pick 'n Save, and Sentry. "Years ago, if you wanted bibb lettuce, asparagus and radicchio, you had to come to Sendik's, or you didn't get it!" John Sendik observes.

Yet business is better than ever, he says. And looking around at his bustling aisles and expanded offerings, there is no reason to doubt him. "In the last 10 years, everybody wants to be healthy." John confidently says, "And now the younger generation buys in more quantity. They think nothing of buying a bag of peaches—or a big bag of apples—they put one in their kid's lunch bag every day."

He believes that what he calls "the education of the consumer" has been the greatest benefit to his business. "We have been here—what, 70-some years—and we have sold more. Our sales are up every year, every year." He now speaks with a quiet, almost wistful reverence. "We always say 'We'll never do more than we did this past year,' and every year we always do better. We always sell more flowers, we always do more sales."

"Most of the year, I deal more with the customers, my brother Tony does the markets. He goes about twice a week down to Chicago—it used to be more, but now the distribution is much better than it used to be. Milwaukee gets a lot of good stuff. Most days, we go to the markets in Milwaukee."

Sendik's traditionally has been more expensive (and less well-stocked) for staples than Pick 'n Save or Jewel-Osco. But many of Sendik's prices are competitive, and they have begun regularly posting specials. A growing number of people who are not wealthy shop there for fresh produce, or the occasional good steak. Pleasing all people, not just Mrs. Uihlien, was a Tony Sendik mantra, but on the other hand, so was this: "Never sacrifice quality for price."

Good service has also been a Sendik's signature. Longtime customer Martine Meyer still connects that style with her mother, who came here from Morocco. "I took her here and she couldn't get over it—such a wonderful green grocer's! When I was looking for an ingredient to make a fancy Moroccan meal, I asked Mr. Sendik for the herb and he would find it."

"And one other great thing," says Teweles. "The boys will carry your groceries to your car and really not expect a tip—a genuine customers' perk. I do give them a Christmas gift—and a special gift to my favorite ladies."

But customer loyalty to Sendik's attests to more than an appreciation for its produce or service; it attests to people's hunger for the old ambience of the neighborhood market. With all the independence that late 20th-century highways, suburbs, catalogues, computers, online shopping and television affords us, a sense of community can elude us. Shopping at a discount warehouse, we face the void with strangers and a cart.

But not at Sendik's. "I always stop and shop with the Men of Meat," says customer Mike Huebner. "That's what I call them—Tim, Mike, Steve, Mr. G. I've been shopping there for

11 years. Not only the best meat around, but the best service, too. I always spend a good portion of time—10 or 15 minutes—discussing the Packers and Bears with them."

Huebner and his yoga-teacher wife have now moved to Chicago. But they make a monthly pilgrimage back to Downer Avenue. "About \$250 a stop," Huebner says. "Last time I bought 12 tenderloin steaks, eight center-cut pork chops, a pork roast, 10 boned chicken breasts—oh, and some baby-back ribs. I had the finest rack of lamb from that store I've ever purchased. I buy four to five racks a shot."

Customers at Sendik's talk with staff and with other customers. You can try out your rusty Italian with Germano, or ask the "Men of Meat" how to cook your chops. You can ask Sal, or John or Tony to pick you out the ripest melon. You can catch up with old acquaintances, people-watch, or chat with the lovely women at the counters. (Children grow up under these check-out women's benevolent gaze.)

People age, fall ill, get well, and die. And at Sendik's, you can talk about it—with the staff and the customers. (Checkout line conversations at Sendik's are material for a play.) When Tony Sendik died in 1992 at the age of 86, many of us mourned his passing as if our own old uncle had departed us. Always imposing but familiar in his long, white coat and black beret, he presided over his flowers with the bearing of an aristocrat. His traditional presence helped us to measure out our days and lives.

In the meantime, the big chain stores loom all the larger. An era on Downer has come to an end; the Sentry supermarket has closed, as has the old community standby, The Coffee Trader. An Osco will be moving in and rumors abound as to what else will come—there are stories of a Heinemann's, a Gap.

There had been hopes that Sendik's would expand into the old Sentry building. "I tried very hard to take over that store," says John Sendik. "We were going to make that Sendik's self-serve. Packaged baked goods, packaged deli, packaged meats, low-priced groceries. Then we read in the paper it was going to Osco! I thought it was coming to me. What am I supposed to do?"

How all this will affect Sendik's Market is still uncertain. But there are hopes in the community that at least Sendik's traditional hours (no late nights and closed on Sundays) will be expanded.

John Sendik is noncommittal. What makes their business special, he says, is that it's a "very, very hands-on business. My brother and I are here six days a week. I get up for work every morning at 4:30. Sunday is a day of rest. If my kids didn't make noise on Sunday, I could easily sleep to noon."

But there are already hints of change; this year the store opened till 2 p.m. on Memorial Day and Labor Day. "I don't even want to tell anybody, but we were very busy, really busy. I probably had two dozen requests to expand our hours on Memorial Day," John says. Will he? "Never say never; never is a long time."

Whatever the store's hours, it's likely to fill with customers. The old instinct for the village market is still inside us, thirsting for conversation, yearning to relate. So we search out the few places where we can satisfy these urges—the coffee shops, corner taverns, hair salons, even public spaces in our malls. And Sendik's. We are community when we

gather in its aisles.

"It brings back memories of traveling through Europe," says Biondi, a relatively new customer of just six years. "If you're in a small town in Europe, you shop at the butcher's and the baker's and all the other stores. But here you can do it under one roof and it's still personal. It's like visiting a friend. It's like family."