

Decades of dedication

Dick Mazza's General Store



L to R: Owner Dick Mazza, Store Manager Mark Godaire and Liquor Agency Manager Mary Ann Miller. (Courtesy photo)

Every morning just after 6 a.m., Dick Mazza unlocks the front door, turns on the lights and starts getting his store ready for the day. It's a similar routine he's kept for nearly 67 years at Dick Mazza's General Store — the Colchester business first opened by his father in 1954.

"I was in high school and my dad built it — it was tiny then, attached to the house," Mazza says. "When I graduated, I immediately came here full-time; in 1957, and I never left."

Sitting on the south side of Malletts Bay, Dick Mazza's General Store has been a town fixture for decades, frequented by locals, generations of Canadians (who travel to the area in droves during non-pandemic times) and fleets of Lake Champlain boaters who rely on the family-run spot for necessities.

"We were always a full-scale store," Mazza says. "We always sold meat, produce, groceries, a little bit of everything. When we first opened in 1954, we stocked the whole store with all the groceries, a little beer and a few things. It cost \$1,800 to fill the entire store back then."

It would cost a bit more these days. Expansions,

additions and the opening of the liquor agency in 1975 have seen the store grow over the decades. What hasn't changed quite as much are the faces customers encounter when they step inside. Mazza talks about many of the people who keep the store running in terms of decades. The original meat cutter spent more than 30 years there; the deli manager has been with Mazza for 52 years; another cashier and an employee in the meat department both have 20 years; and store manager Mark Godaire has been working at the store for 36 years.

To what does Mazza — who, in addition to being a longtime shopkeeper, is a 35-year state senator — attribute the longevity of many staffers?

"I think it's that we treat each other with respect," he says. "We work together very well and I try to do the best I can with them financially. Without them I would not have this store, it's very simple. You have to have dedicated people, especially if you're specializing in fresh-made salads and custom meats."

In addition to those fresh and custom foods, there are also the highly sought-after and re-owned homemade pies. Godaire estimates the

store sells "thousands and thousands" of pies annually, with favorites rotating seasonally.

"We bake them out back every day," he says. "Around the holidays pumpkin is a big one. The apple pies are great and the berry pie is phenomenal. Off the top of my head, I'd say we make 10-12 different flavors of pies."

I learned very early on from my dad that the customer always comes first. I learned that you do whatever you can to make it a good experience.

Step inside and visitors will discover a thoughtfully curated wine department, built by Godaire. "I try to find wines you won't see in the box stores," he says. Beyond that is the meat department, soda and beer coolers — the store has developed a loyal following for its excellent craft brew selection — and the liquor agency, run by yet another longtime employee, Mary Ann Miller.

"We've got a Vermont products section right as you walk in the door," Miller says. "It's

the very first section you see, and it's all Vermont products."

Shelves of spirits line the perimeter of the agency, which is stocked with well-known brands and hard-to-find choices.

"The liquor store has been a great addition," Mazza says. "We've always had good folks working there, and it's a great mix with the grocery store. It's a nice, clean liquor store — something we can be proud of. And that's part of our success. It's whether people enjoy coming to your establishment. If they enjoy coming here and they're treated well, they'll come back. That's why the emphasis in the grocery store and the liquor store is always about customer service, customer relationships. Every employee goes the extra mile to carry out people's groceries or to carry out people's liquor order.

"I learned very early on from my dad that the customer always comes first. I learned that you do whatever you can to make it a good experience, because that customer will tell 10-20 people about their experience. That's why I'm proud of what we do on the liquor side. It's been a good relationship."

The family in "family-owned" has also been an important part of the store's success. Mazza and his wife, Dolly, will celebrate 55 years married this year. His son Michael (who owns the auto parts store across the street) and daughter Melissa live nearby, allowing the busy store owner to see his grandchildren often — a welcome convenience, because at the end of the day, when the last customer has been taken care of and it's time to go home, it's Mazza who turns out the lights and locks the door for the evening.

"I love the business and I love the people," he says. "You have to love this business because it's a service business. I just enjoy meeting folks, and even with my political career over the years, I still like this business. I've never walked away from it. I look forward to coming to work every day. Anything you do you have to enjoy it, because money isn't that important. You have to enjoy what you do." 🍸

Dick Mazza's General Store
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