

# THE STRIP!

Celebrating the historic Strip District



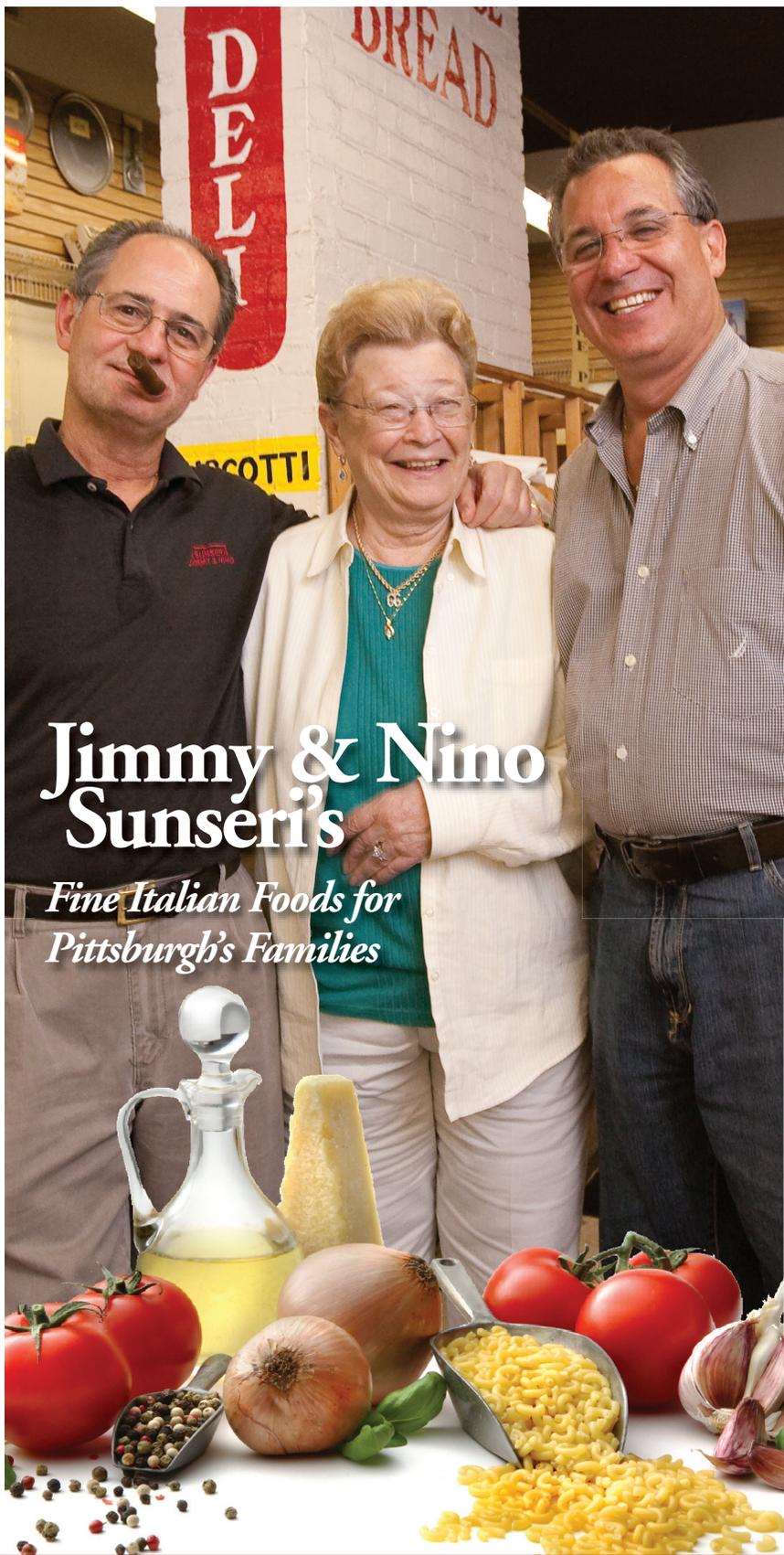
In the Kitchen Expands



Washington's Landing Visits the Strip



A Trip Down Memory Lane



## Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's

*Fine Italian Foods for Pittsburgh's Families*

# Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's *Fine Italian Foods for Pittsburgh's Families*

by Christopher Cussat



Jimmy Sunseri (L), mother Ann (M), Nino Sunseri (R)

When I first arrived at Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's to interview the famous Jimmy, I was told, "He's back in the kitchen," as if I should have known better. In fact, this hands-on co-owner feels most at home cooking, baking, making his famous home-made chili, wedding soup, or pasta fagioli, and constantly interacting with customers, some of whom are fourth-generation patrons of the store.

As I walked toward the back room and called out his name, an unassuming man in a red apron turned around and gave me a confident grin while holding a large, unlit, Winston Chuchillesque cigar. When he initially spoke of himself in the third person, I knew immediately that I was in a special place and talking to an interesting man. This was definitely the guy I had heard so much about.

Since 1985, Jimmy Sunseri and his brother, Nino, have been providing some of the best and most popular Italian foods in the Strip District. After deciding to strike out on their own and build their own company, the brothers have never looked back. Today, their stores continue to be extremely popular Strip destinations providing ethnic-cuisine staples for all of Pittsburgh.

Jimmy and Nino Sunseri's is actually comprised of three separate, but connected, businesses. Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's is a retail and wholesale shop that also offers lunches and catering. Bella Notte is a pizza, pasta, and hoagie shop. And Sunseri Sunrise Bakery offers fine baked goods and plays on the family name. The Sunseri brothers are truly two jacks of all trades.

Although Jimmy and Nino have been in business for 25 years, together, they have nearly 90 years of combined experience in the retail and wholesale of specialty foods.

"Nino and I have been working in this type of business since I was 13 and he was 12," says Jimmy. Early on in their lives, the brothers' father, Anthony (Tony), taught these two entrepreneurs about the importance of working hard.

"We were instilled with a phenomenal work ethic from our father. He believed that you had to keep yourself occupied and in his mind, the best way to keep his two boys occupied was to bring us down to work in the Strip," he says.

Jimmy remembers a few particularly long days unloading supplies from tractor-trailer trucks and railroad cars. "At that time, nothing was palletized, and everything would be on the floor," he says. "So you

had to touch, manually handle, and move every single case. And sometimes the railroad cars would have 3,000 to 3,500 cases!"

He also recalls something his father always said, which helps to further define the Sunseri attitude towards work. "My dad had a philosophy in life and if I heard him say this 100 times I heard him say it 1,000 times. 'Hard work never killed anybody,'" he says, adding, "Well, I have to be honest with you. I'd get half way through one of those railroad cars and I would pray and hope to God that I would drop over dead just to prove him wrong. As you can see, he was right as always."

With a slogan that states, "If it's Italian, it's at Sunseri's," the brothers' stores specialize in many, various kinds of Italian foods. In fact, all of the stores' recipes, flavors, and tastes have been carefully modified and perfected over the years by Tony, Jimmy, and Nino through continuing trials and adjustments.

Jimmy and Nino Sunseri's carries a wide variety of olive oils, balsamic vinegars, herbs, spices, and fine, imported cheeses. And you can simultaneously taunt and reward your taste buds with a diverse selection of meats including prosciutto, imported Calabrese Salami, as well as homemade soppressata (cured meat), hot sausage, and pepperoni that's called Jimmy and Nino's Longstick. These and many more delicious products, and the Sunseri's mystifying Mystery Cheese – the ingredients for which are a family secret – are all available for patrons to create one of the best sandwiches they've ever eaten.

Tony invented Mystery Cheese and the Sunseri's legendary dipping peppers. "One day," says Jimmy, "my father came up with the idea for dipping peppers, which are Cubanelle, hot banana, and jalapeño peppers mixed with prosciutto and portabella mushrooms. We bake all of that in olive oil for three hours."

These peppers are great on a slice of Sunseri homemade bread with some Mystery Cheese, on any sandwich, with pasta, and according to Jimmy, if you put them in scrambled eggs you'll "think you've died and gone to heaven."

Besides excellent pizza, the Sunseris make pepperoni rolls that are a Pittsburgh favorite and are considered to be the best pepperoni rolls in the area. On any given Saturday, Jimmy and Nino sell about 80 to 110 of them. They also have a popular sausage puff made with their own homemade sausage, mozzarella, and provolone. Add some fresh pasta or one of Jimmy's daily soups to your meal and you'll always leave Jimmy and Nino's with a smile on your face and satisfaction in your stomach.

Vegetable lovers enjoy offerings like marinated artichokes, a huge selection of olives, and fried egg plant, which is never frozen. The Sunseris also make fantastic chicken



Anthony Sunseri

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parmigiana and lasagna on designated days, and homemade pasta sauce. They go through 70 to 80 gallons of this sauce per week.

Jimmy and Nino Sunseri's stocks many other different foods like imported Italian

ally self-critique their products and ask for their customers' opinions. "As I normally do," says Jimmy, "I always make sure to ask people how everything was, simply because I want the feedback. If something wasn't up to par or the quality isn't what they feel

it should be, we want to know about it. Nino and I are very, very meticulous about this."

This commitment to quality, always trying to improve, and wanting to continually offer only the best in fine, authentic, Italian food have made Jimmy and Nino Sunseri's a lasting success. And it's also a Strip District favorite stop for the multitudes of dedicated customers who frequent this establishment every week.



Front row l. to r. Gus, Dad, Linda, Mother and Jimmy. Back row l. to r. Nino and Sal

tuna fish or tuna ventresca, which means the stomach of the tuna. "Ordinarily when you buy Italian tuna," says Jimmy, "you're getting more of the meat from the back of the fish, but consequently, when you get meat from the stomach, you're getting less muscle. So it's much more tender and flavorful."

In addition, a plethora of homemade breads are also well known and well sold, including six constant offerings. These include a rustic Italian which has an egg wash on it and a little heavier crust; a standard Italian; a garlic bread; one made with fresh onions, olive oil, and garlic; a bread made with just olive oil and onions; and the most popular — a two-pound, round, rustic bread that Jimmy calls "just phenomenal." "Our breads contain no preservatives, no lard, and no dairy products," he says.

If you have a sweet tooth, look no further. The Sunseris have a great assortment of homemade biscotti and reputedly the best sfogiatelle in the city, which is a clam-shell-shaped pastry filled with lemon zest ricotta.

"I sell them like I'm giving them away and God forbid if I run out," says Jimmy. Plus, the homemade cannoli is second to none, because the Sunseris make the cannoli cream themselves on the premises, and it's guaranteed fresh. Jimmy and Nino's cannoli recipe is a family tradition originated by their grandmother.

To ensure that they serve only the freshest and best-tasting food, the Sunseris continu-

"I've had several people tell me that after the food, the second-best reason they come in here is simply because they feel like they're sitting at home in their own kitchen and they're surrounded by all of their family and friends," says Jimmy.



Jimmy and Nino, when it all began

Teamwork and a strong sense of family are perhaps the most defining and impressive aspects of the Sunseris. In fact, since they opened their businesses, the brothers have been growing, adapting, and getting better with age.

“Nino and I are like two chameleons,” Jimmy says in jest. One thing is for sure, you never, ever know what Jimmy and Nino are up to.

The brothers complement each other perfectly, because both specialize in equally important, yet different aspects of running their stores. “If you see Nino and me together,” Jimmy says, “there’s generally a problem because he’s usually doing what he does -- running wholesale, administrating the office, and checking what’s going on at Bella Notte and the bakery -- and I’m up here in my little dungeon just doing what I gotta do.”

As the third generation in this business, Jimmy and Nino offer a touch of the past and a highly personalized experience to their customers. “We are probably one of the few establishments left that still have that feeling and sense of going into the old neighborhood mom-and-pop stores,” says Jimmy.

He and Nino are seeing third and fourth generation customers. They know the children, grandchildren, and the great grandchildren, and the moms and dads – in fact, everybody’s names and their families. “The truth of the matter,” says Jimmy, “is that we are like an extended family to almost the entire city. That’s what Nino and I are about. We’re just trying to keep the family tradition alive.”



As far as being a business in the Strip District, Jimmy doesn’t believe it’s for those who are hard-work challenged. “In all honesty, if you’re going to be a true Strip merchant, you have to be bred for it. This is not a lifestyle for the soft,” he says. “You have to be able to give a lot more than you’ll ever know you’ll get back. I don’t want to be harsh in that, but what I mean is it takes a lot of hours down here and a lot



*The Shamrock, homage to their Irish Mother*

of hard work.” He also greatly appreciates all of the people he’s met who visit him in the Strip. “The best and most comforting things that come to my mind about being here,” he says, “are having made the friends we’ve made and developing the relationships we’ve developed, which are life-long. There aren’t any fly-by-night friendships here. You make a friend down here on the Strip, and you’ve made a friend for life.”

Jimmy and Nino attribute their success to the enduring support of family. “We may be at the forefront,” Jimmy says, “but you have to realize that our father was always an inspiration, and I really can’t remember any time where my father suggested something or told Nino and I something and he was wrong. Dad’s retired, but our mom, Ann, is still here working everyday. We also can’t forget our sister, Linda, and our two other brothers, Gus and Sal, who were here for us in the beginning when we first started all of this. So the people who instilled the best instincts in us were our family—and when I say family, of course, there’s also our other family — our customers.”

Before leaving Jimmy, I was able to uncover one of his and Nino’s secrets. And it will now be revealed for the world to know. No, it’s not the ingredients in the Mystery Cheese or whether or not Jimmy ever lights those giant cigars. Toward the close of my interview, he smiled as he leaned close to tell me the revelation. “There are two things that can never be known, he said, “and they have to be the two best kept secrets in possibly all of America. Number one, nobody knows what kind of cigar I have and whether or not I light it. The second best kept secret is that Nino and I are half Irish.”

Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's continued

Jimmy & Nino Sunseri's is located at 1906 Penn Avenue in the Strip. Hours are Monday through Saturday 7:00 a.m. until 3:45 p.m.

Sunseri Sunrise Bakery is located across the street at 1901 Penn Avenue and has the same hours.

Bella Notte is open seven days a week at 1914 Penn Avenue. Hours are 11:00 a.m. until 8:00 p.m. Monday through Thursday, 11:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m. on Friday and Saturday, and 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. on Sunday. !

## COMING TO THE STRIP

# The Sunseri's New Store

Jimmy and Nino Sunseri are considered to be the best at what they do. But they're never satisfied with remaining static. They're always looking to grow and improve. Coming this Fall, look for their latest endeavor – a new store, “The Best of Jimmy and Nino Sunseri’s at 1901 Penn Avenue, just across from the location of their current store at 1906 Penn Avenue. Products at the new store will be upscale, hard to get, of every-day good quality, and will be geared for the genuine Strip shopper. The existing store at 1906 Penn Avenue will close upon the grand opening of the new store.

What's New? continued

with Re/Max Realty Brokers.

“If we had a one-stop-shop transparent Application/Inspection government agency and tax incentives for entrepreneurs, it would be one way to bring back Pittsburgh to the energized city it once was. Residential urban lofts and townhomes in The Strip would take off,” she added.

Maggie Jayson  
Re/Max Realty Brokers 412-999-9528

### Keep on grillin!

The outdoor grilling season continues and Roberta Turkas of Strip District Meats suggests marinated flank steak as an excellent alternative to the usual meat selections.

“If requested by the customer, we can provide marinades for virtually any of our products, says Turkas. “I suggest the following marinade for flank steak,” she added.

### Flank Steak Marinade

- 1 Flank steak
- 1 Tablespoon fresh or ground ginger
- 1/4 Cup water
- 1/2 Cup soy sauce
- 2 or 3 Cloves minced garlic

Grill to preference  
Cut thin against the grain

Strip District Meats  
2121 Penn avenue 412-391-1762

!



75 Waterfront Drive, Washington's Landing (MLS#779340)

Looking for the perfect home in The City surrounded by water? Well, take a look at 75 Waterfront Drive, located on Washington's Landing. This exceptional end unit townhome features spacious living room with built-in cabinetry for entertainment media, stained glass windows, and gas fireplace. The ultra chic kitchen comes complete with state-of-the-art lighting, granite with tete a tete table and island, ceramic backsplash, rich wood cabinets. Three bedrooms and two decks, each overlooking the water with City skyline views.

Washington's Landing is like no other...situated on the Allegheny River with Three Rivers Rowing, walking trails to PNC Park & The Steelers' Stadium, flat sidewalks, marina onsite, and RedFin Blues restaurant. Just two minutes to Downtown & The Cultural District via car, kayak, yacht, or bicycle. Life just doesn't get much better.

Call Maggie Jayson for your own private showing and tour of The Island. You'll never leave home. *Just like being at the beach! You deserve it!*



Maggie Jayson



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