



**McHENRY
MUSEUM**
& Historical Society



Newsletter

August 2021

History Lesson

Summer in Modesto can feel like a summer in Sicily. If you ask most families of Italian immigrants in Stanislaus County, you will find it was California's Mediterranean climate which attracted their ancestors to settle in this area. Modesto is home to many prominent Italian families, one of the most prolific are the Sciabica Family of *Sciabica's California Olive Oil* who this year celebrates 85 years in business. A family business now on its fifth generation.

The story of the beginning of *Nick Sciabica & Sons Olive Oil* dates to nineteenth century Italy. Nicola Sciabica (1887-1963) was born in Marsala in the Trapani Province of Sicily. At the time, Marsala was riddled with poverty, and young Nicola found work in the olive oil business. In 1911, following the death of his father, Nicola, and his mother Josephine (1862-1950) immigrated to the United States and settled in Waterbury, Connecticut. It was in Waterbury where Nicola would meet and marry Fedele Grosso (1891-1957) and where they would have their three sons Joseph (1915-2010), Peter (1918-1929), and Vincent (1920-1990). Connecticut winters were not easy for a family hailing from a warm climate.

**Please call us at:
(209) 618-5387**

Gemma

Joseph

Enjoy,
Happy heart healthy cooking,
Olive you!
Gemma S. Sciabica

85 YEARS YOUNG
FAMILY OWNED & OPERATED SINCE 1936

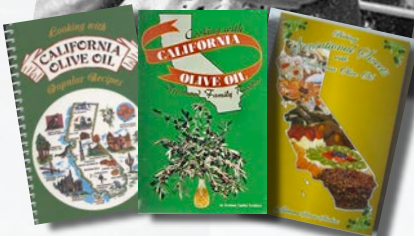
In 1920, Nicola moved his family to San Francisco California to be with his older brother Vincenzo (1886-1943). However, San Francisco summers were cold and foggy, still not warm enough. In 1924, Nicola worked peddling fruit around the state and came to Salida to get watermelons. The climate of the area felt like Sicily thus beginning the family presence in Modesto. In 1925, Nicola purchased land on Encina Avenue, where the family still resides as the oldest residents of the La Loma neighborhood almost 100 years later.

In 1936, Sciabica Olive Oil opened for business with their first and still most popular label, *Marsala*. Nicola's eldest son Joseph who also answered to "J.N." or "Nick" would become the face and main workhorse for the family for the next 74 years. Though olive oil was the focus of the business, the family also grew grapes for wine making. Nicola arranged every year to have his grapes shipped by train back to Waterbury for purchase. Joseph would oversee the packing and journey to the east coast to supervise the unloading. Joseph was always the true salesman of the family and known as the "Guidice," (the judge), as he could settle any problem brought before him. Unfortunately, 1936 was the year the grape market crashed, and the family could only profit from the freight. Joseph continued these trips with the grapes until 1963 with only a few off years.

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*Fedele and Nicola Sciabica
Peter, Vincent, & Joseph*



*Under Sciabica Family picture:
Joseph Sciabica and Tony Grosso
Tony Grosso &
Joseph Sciabica
Gemma Sciabica with Daniel & Nicholas
Gemma Sciabica
Three of Gemma's five cookbooks*

It was on one of these trips where Joseph would meet the woman whom her son calls the foundation of the Sciabica family, Gemma Recchia (1924-2020). Gemma was too born in Waterbury, Connecticut. At the onset to the United States entry into World War II, she was working in the Box Shop with Florence Grosso (1907-1990) who was married to Tony Grosso (1909-2009), Fedele Sciabica's cousin. Gemma was only 19 years old and had never been on a date. Florence decided to play matchmaker and told Gemma she knew of a very handsome man from California she would like her to meet. Gemma agreed, but Gemma's mother Luisa (1886-1971) would not allow it. Luisa would relent. When Joseph came to pick Gemma up, Luisa informed him they would stay for dinner with Tony and Florence. Circumstances worked out well and Joseph and Gemma married April 26, 1943, in Waterbury. Soon after Joseph and Gemma drove with Luisa's supervision to California. Luisa Recchia wanted to see where her daughter would be living. In 1945, Joseph and Gemma welcomed their first son Nicholas, son Daniel arrived seven years later. Tony and Florence Grosso would move to Modesto in the late 1940s and open Rapid Shoe Repair. Following his retirement, Tony would work with the Sciabica Family to help market the olive oil and would be known to all that knew him as "Uncle Tony."

Joseph Sciabica was a workaholic. His day began at sunrise and ended late. Gemma looked after the children and worked to perfect Italian cooking using the family olive oil. Daily, she prepared fresh pastry and coffee for their workers while young Daniel would deliver his mother's refreshments. Joseph had a missionary zeal in selling olive oil. Quality was his number one concern. The 1960s became a difficult time for the business as canneries held a monopoly on olives, and the popularity of olives was for that of a table fruit and not for oil. There was a shortage of olives, most came from Northern California, specifically Oroville. When shipments were received, they usually contained substandard olives. Joseph believed if you cannot make it right with quality, he would not make it at all. Though many members of the family helped with the business over the years, Joseph remained the man in charge. In 1978 his son Daniel joined the business officially and has remained ever since.

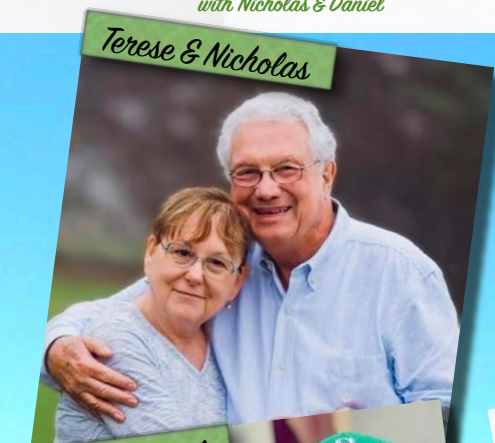
Joseph Sciabica, sometimes with Uncle Tony at his side, was a staple at local farmer's markets wearing his signature crocheted cap, always made by Gemma. His zeal and persistence to sell olive oil never wavered. He could convince people with no interest in olive oil to try some, and they always came back after using it. Joseph Sciabica passed away at age 95 on October 29, 2010, he could be seen selling his beloved olive oil a mere two weeks prior to his death.

Gemma Sciabica, though always the devoted wife, used her skills as a chef later in life and went into publishing. She always cooked from scratch and with every recipe she made she used Sciabica California Olive Oil. If a recipe called for butter, she substituted for olive oil. In 1997 at age 73, she self-published the first of five cookbooks over the course of a decade. In each book, she not only wrote recipes but included family photos and many cooking tips. Her son Daniel calls his mother's books "the Bible of cooking with California Olive Oil." One month shy of ten years apart, Gemma Sciabica passed away on September 29, 2020, at age 96, to join her beloved husband. She was reunited with all her departed loved ones, and as was stated in her obituary, "They are all now enjoying a wonderful banquet in Heaven!"

For the past decade, Nicholas Sciabica's son Jonathan has overseen the business. Daniel's daughter Christa plays a pivotal role, and currently Nicholas' grandsons Nicholas and Andrew joined the business. Young Nicholas is currently handling customer service and will soon be making a transition to the production mill; Andrew is the in-house accountant and all-around salesman like his great-grandfather Joseph, making it a five generations business. *The Marsala Brand* is still their oldest, however the line has expanded to include *Sciabica Varietal Olive Oils*, *Sciabica Fruit & Herb Olive Oils* and *Mission Trail Olive Oil*. Since 1996, the Sciabica family headquarters their bottling, distribution, offices, and gift shop at 2150 Yosemite Boulevard, the former location of A&W Brands and prior to that J. Hungerford Smith Co, but their production still takes place at the Encina Avenue address. Their story is more than just that of an olive oil company, but of a loving family who continues the work of their ancestors. Nicola and Fedele and Joseph and Gemma are shining down knowing their legacy is in good hands. As they close the end of a difficult year for the world and the end of their first year without their matriarch and foundation, the Sciabica family seems strong, still following the message from Gemma Sciabica's favorite bible quote, "Love one another as I have loved you."



Joseph & Gemma's 50th Wedding Anniversary with Nicholas & Daniel



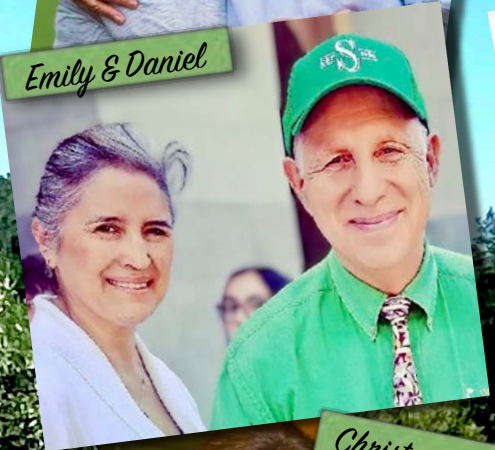
Terese & Nicholas



Joseph and Gemma



Jonathan



Emily & Daniel



Joseph & his Marsala wine grapes



Andrew & Nicholas



Christa and Gemma



Article by:
David Seymour
President, MM&HS

Special Dedication



Linda Stallone Seymour
August 19, 1951-December 9, 2018

The love of history in community is passed down one generation to the next. This article on the Sciabica family is dedicated to the memory of its inspiration Linda Stallone Seymour, mother to MM&HS President David Seymour. Linda was raised with strong ties to her Italian heritage. She was born in Modesto on August 19, 1951 and raised in the El Vista district along with the Sciabica family. Linda's family operated Stallone Bros. Market on Seventh and H Streets from the early 1940s until 1965. Linda's Aunt Mary Stallone (1912-1988) was the best friend of Gemma Sciabica. Mary and Linda's mother Margaret spent a lot of time with Gemma and her children. The Stallone girls grew up playing with the Sciabica boys. Linda attended El Vista School and was taught first grade by McHenry Museum's archivist Janet Lancaster. Linda instilled her love of history and community into her children. With her bright eyes, and welcoming smile, Linda never met a stranger, rather an instant friend. She had a love and devotion to everyone who touched her life. In 2018, she expressed interest in volunteering with the MM&HS but alas she was called away too soon. In this the month of the seventieth anniversary of her birth, we honor one of the greatest cheerleaders for the preservation of the history of Modesto and Italian Heritage.



Circa 1957, 2243 Carol Street, Modesto.
Back L to R:

Sonja Stallone holding Tosia Stallone (1954-1979), Patti Wangelin,
Claudia Heckman, Virginia Stallone holding Regina Stallone.

Front:
Daniel Sciabica, Antoinette Stallone (1949-2000), Andrea Heckman, &
Linda Stallone (1951-2018).

Updates



• The McHenry Museum officially opens August 6, 2021!

- This initial soft opening will allow the Museum to operate three days a week, Friday, Saturday, and Sunday.
- We will be recruiting more docents and any volunteers willing to help in the gift shop, please send a message on the website www.mchenrymuseum.org or email david@mchenrymuseum.org if you are interested.
- We would like to welcome Marco Sepulveda-Hallinan as the city representative for both the McHenry Museum and the McHenry Mansion. Marco has worked with us for years but is currently overseeing both buildings.
- The Board of the MM&HS would like to thank outgoing board members Ray Dias and Nancy Bancroft for their six years of service.
- The Board of the MM&HS will be holding our regular in-person meetings again starting August 17, 2021, in the Museum basement.

*Membership renewals to the MM&HS will be mailed the first part of August at a prorated rate excluding June and July 2021.