

LOS ANGELES

ITALIAN COMMUNITY

A Venetian in Los Angeles: Ugo Mamolo on Cakes, Bakes and Benê's Bakery



Ugo Mamolo in one of his bakeries

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Walking into Gelson's Market, on Laurel Canyon Blvd., the first thing that greets the eye is the 'Coffee & Pastries' sign.

The man behind these pastries is Trieste-born, Ugo Mamolo, who owns Viktor Benê's Bakery.

His creations are some of Los Angeles' favorite *pasticcini*, hence their availability at 15 Gelson's locations across the city. The quality and variety of his pastries is unmatched owing to its almost one-hundred-year-old heritage of Europe's finest pastry making.

Multi-coloured macaroons, cream-filled cannoli, alligator

cake, chocolate glassy-glazed cakes, éclairs and cookies line up behind polished glass to exhibit Ugo Mamolo's finest *dolci*.

I chose a mini chocolate croissant and a Lavazza espresso for my breakfast, when I met Ugo one Saturday morning to hear his story, and how he went from San Giusto, Trieste to Brentwood, Los Angeles.

In an article published in *Il Piccolo*, the Trieste newspaper, your daughter described you as 'l'incarnazione del sogno americano.' How hard was it to achieve this American dream?

It was pretty tough at the beginning because I didn't know English. But I was lucky enough to find a job as soon as I arrived as a baker, just before I was enrolled into the U.S. army.

My desire to go to America

was cultivated by the packages and letters my aunt used to send to my family. I was about 14 or 15, the war had ended, and my family wasn't in the best position, so my aunt used to send us parcels from America to help us out.

Determined to get to America, I took it upon myself to go to the Consulate in Trieste to inquire about VISA's. They told me there was a nine-year wait as each city had a quota. However, I was undeterred and I went to the port captaincy to see what I could do. I wanted to know if there was any way I could *work* my way to America on a ship.

They told me I was too young, and that there wasn't a lot I could do, but they said I could work in the kitchen as a chef or an *aiuto-chef* as long as I had a few years experience.

I looked for work in all the bakeries and restaurants in Trieste and eventually a bakery called Luzzati's accepted me. I planned on working there as a way of obtaining my VISA, and then planned on going to college to train to be a doctor. But things turned out differently. Shortly after I arrived in America, I was enrolled in the army by the U.S. government and spent time in Greenland and Korea.

By the time I left the army, I was 26-years-old. Then I met my wife. She had come from Switzerland to America to learn English.

After only 2 months and 11 days of knowing each other, we got married, and have been married for 52 years.

So did you ever end up work-

ing on the ship?

No I didn't, although I should have done. Trieste became a *territorio libero* after WWII, so I thought to myself, Trieste is not in Italy now, and being a city of only 350,000 that meant it had a quota all to itself. So I went back to the American Consulate and they gave me my VISA immediately.

How did you first meet Viktor Benê's?

Viktor Benê's had already been in business for 50 years and his bakery was only three blocks away from the one I set up in 1966, 'Mamolo's Continental Bakery'. He was an elderly man when we knew him, and I used to help him out when he was missing things like sugar or flour because he was a good man. Eventually, he asked me if I and my business partner, Ruggero Terzuolo, wanted to buy his business and we did in 1973. He was a very good man, hence why we decided to retain his name. After I bought Viktor Benê's, we got to know the Gelson brothers, which led us to setting up in their Supermarkets in 1976.

Could you tell me more about your collaboration with the Gelson brothers?

I got to know the younger brother, Bernie Gelson because he used to buy *dolci* from me. I always used to ask him, Bernie, why do you come to my small bakery when you have your own in your Markets? He told me, he preferred what I made.

They didn't serve fresh pastries as everything was frozen and mass-produced. Bernie had a supermarket mentality: it was all jars, bottles and freezers. So when they sold pastries, they'd go into the freezer. I told him that it shouldn't be like that.

Then, finally, one day the baker that worked in his bakery did not show up, and Bernie called me to help out. It was 11am and by 3pm, I was there, with *tutte le casse piene*. The display cases were full with freshly baked pastries, and he was impressed. From that moment on, he made me promise that I would take the other stores in hand. That happened gradually, one at a time.

What was a typical day like for you when you first started out?

It was tough. I didn't have much money and I was all by myself, doing everything. I had three girls upfront but I did everything: I was the baker, the pot washer, the deliveryman, you name it. I would be up at 3.30am to make bread, coffee cakes and decorate cakes. Often at midnight I would still be there.

Mamolo is the epitome of the American dream. In one generation he has built a business that he is proud of. What gives him more joy though is his 4 children and 9 grandchildren. When I asked if any of them spoke Italian, he fondly said with a smile in his eyes, "il mio primo nipote è più italiano di me."

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