



OLD SAVANNAH

# Swimming Against the Current

Doing things differently has led this business to 75 years of Savannah seafood success

*Written by* IAN DZIURA / *Photography by* CHIA CHONG

**MOMENTS BEFORE I MEET CHARLIE RUSSO**, I glance around his office in Russo's Seafood and find it to be quite unassuming for someone who's overseen such a flourishing business. It's a space so tiny, his is the only chair that can fit in it. No gigantic desk with a Newton's Cradle bouncing back and forth,

but rows and rows of fishing trip photos lining the walls.

I eventually find Charlie hustling through the shop's backroom, cutting and filleting away along with several employees in the moments before we're scheduled to speak. Along with his modest office space, watching Charlie run around with his staff tells me »

he sees himself more as another worker at Russo's Seafood, not a CEO-type who refuses to get his hands dirty. He's wearing a slightly smudgy apron, after all, not a suit and tie. Above the apron and below a thin patch of gray hair is a jolly but focused expression; he's clearly in his element. The Savannah native has been working at the fish market for most of his life, fileting flounder as early as 6 years old. Now 78, Charlie Russo's seen plenty of seafood markets come and go, but thanks to a devoted approach, Russo's Seafood is celebrating 75 years of family fish dealing.

When Charlie was 3, his father, Charlie Russo Sr., came back from World War II and had a giant decision to make. He could go back to the comfy post office job he had prior to joining the Navy, relishing its benefits, retirement and stability. Or he could cast his line at a path with plenty of uncertainty, but plenty more potential reward. Instead of delivering mail, Charlie Sr. opened Russo's Seafood in 1946.

None of this would've been possible if it weren't for Louis Rayola, a seafood business owner who operated on Bull Street. When Charlie Sr. trotted out of the post office moments after applying for a job, Rayola spotted him and changed his life forever. The men knew each other simply for, as Charlie Jr. puts it, "bein' Italian." The post office wouldn't offer Charlie Sr. a job until a spot opened up a few years later, so when Rayola told him he needed help, he took it.

Having grown up on a farm milking cows, Charlie Sr. had never cleaned a fish before. But he stayed with Rayola for a while during the Great Depression and learned the business. He worked 76 hours per week, seven days a week, for a \$10 pay rate.

"Not \$10 a day, not \$10 an hour, \$10 a *week*," Charlie repeats for emphasis.

Charlie's father wasn't the only one in his family tree with a history of marketing mackerel in Savannah. His mother's grandfather, Matteo Cannarella, was a Buenos Aires fisherman who joined America's immigration wave of the late 19th century. Matteo and his sons all sold fish at the farmer's market in Ellis Square.

Charlie Sr. and his wife, Antoinette, married not long before the U.S. entered the war, so when he returned, he felt he had the industry contacts to thrive. While scouting for a spot »



Rows of fishing trip photos line the walls of Charlie Russo's office.



Bushels of fresh oysters are a staple of Russo's Seafood.



**Charlie Russo gets his hands dirty, skillfully filleting fish like he's done since as early as age 6.**

to build his market, a Savannahian named Mr. Masterpoulis asked Charlie Sr. what he was doing.

“How about building it right here in my backyard?” said the man. And in 1946, Russo’s Seafood opened its doors on 31st and Waters. “Modern” is the word Charlie Jr. uses to describe the establishment’s secret to slipping past competition. “We’ve changed with the times, and a lot of them didn’t.”

Other seafood places back then had a slapdash method of prepping fish. According to Charlie Jr., they’d plop a 5-pound bucket of water on the table, scale a fish (and “do a half-ass job of doin’ that,” he explains) and then dunk every fish after that in the same water. Then they’d wrap the fish in yesterday’s issue of Savannah Morning News at a time when there were no health inspectors around to tell them they couldn’t.

Charlie’s father, on the other hand, used running water and was the first seafood shop in town with an ice machine and garbage disposal. This standard of cleanliness continues to the present, where each day of operation concludes with Charlie and his staff rinsing down the ice machine and

replacing it with new ice for the next day.

Then there’s the Russos’ ability to fantastically filet product. Take shad, an Atlantic species, for example. “There are very few people in the country who can debone it because it’s so, so bony,” says Cecilia Russo, Charlie’s daughter. But after decades of practice, Russo’s provides meatier cuts than those in a grocery chain’s seafood section. It’s this extra effort that’s really paid off.

All of Charlie Jr.’s five kids have helped out over the years, and his son, Charles III, went on to open his own seafood place in Bluffton, South Carolina. Countless awards bear the family name, but this business goes beyond people with the last name “Russo.” When Charlie Jr. arrives at 6 in the morning to prep, some of his employees have already beaten him there. Ten recessions and now a global pandemic have hit America in the last 75 years, but none of them have sunk Russo’s Seafood, the family fish market that continues to lead Savannah’s seafood scene. **S**