

G&G Supermarkets: Generations in the Making

WALK INTO A G&G SUPERMARKETS LOCATION ON ANY GIVEN DAY AND YOU'LL SEE SECOND AND THIRD GENERATION CUSTOMERS WHO LITERALLY GREW UP SHOPPING THE AISLES.

Finding generations of shoppers in a G&G Supermarket in itself isn't unusual. What is remarkable is that you're likely to find third generation members of the Gong family taking care of them. And a fourth generation might be waiting in the wings.

"My father and mother, Gee Kai and Fong and my brother-in-law Robert, started the business in 1963 and my brothers and sisters and I have worked in it most of our lives," said Dick Gong, co-owner of G&G Supermarkets. "It wasn't long after my dad opened the first store in Stockton that we started working behind the scenes doing things like sweeping up and putting away bottles. As we got older we just moved into other jobs like stocking and ordering."

Gong loves the grocery industry and the thought of ever leaving it rarely if ever crossed his mind.

"It sometimes occurred to me," Gong says about finding a new career, "But this industry's been great. I've always loved the one-on-one relationships I have with people in the community. I just couldn't take sitting behind a desk all day."

Having a more flexible schedule gives him time to pursue one of his long time passions — gardening.

"It's a wonderful feeling being in tune with nature. Besides, the plants don't talk back," he mused.

Gong and his wife Vivian, who also spends free time enjoying Santa Rosa's numerous parks and community activities, have two children. Melissa, who has three children of her own, is the health and safety coordinator for the two G&G stores.

"We're fortunate she's involved in the business," Gong says. His son Jason works fulltime at the Petaluma store and has three children of his own.

With a grand total of six grandchildren so far, will any be involved in the business?

"It's too early to tell," Gong says. "I expect a couple of them will become involved after college. But we don't want to push them. In fact, it's probably better to have them start out somewhere else for a couple of years. Then, they'll be able to make a better decision about what they want to pursue."



Meanwhile, G&G has been fortunate enough to have an abundance of family to take the reins. Among them is Gong's brother Lee, who is in charge of deli and bakery, while Don handles wine and DSD vendors.

His brother-in-law's son TJ is in the business, along with siblings Carol, Connie, Jodie, and Lee's son Devin. Gong's sister Betty, who recently passed away, headed up customer service initiatives and human resources.

The stores have come a long way since 1963 when the first 7,200 square-foot store opened in Santa Rosa. Prior to that, Gong's father, Gee Kai, worked for Centro Marts, a now defunct local chain in the Central Valley. His uncle Robert, one of the founders of G&G, worked for an independent near Santa Rosa, Calif.

The new store was a success and eventually was replaced with a 25,000 square-foot unit. In 1981, G&G opened a second replacement store in Santa Rosa — an 80,000 square-foot store, which remains its flagship.

In 2000, the company expanded outside its borders, opening a second unit about 20 miles away in Petaluma.

"We grew up with the city and during that time developed a lot of strong relationships because of our support of the community and its various programs," Dick Gong says.

"Business has been good in both stores but a difficult economy has limited expansion," Gong admits. "We have our hands full. But you never know what will happen if an opportunity presents itself."

Meanwhile, Gong believes G&G's strength lies in its longevity and associates.

"We grew up with the city and during that time developed a lot of strong relationships because of our support of the community and its various programs," he says.

Inside the store, success meant giving customers great value from Day One. This enhanced G&G's reputation for having "The best meat in town" — a reputation it enjoys to this day and attracts customers from all over the county.



"We also try to be aggressive by bringing in the latest product trends for our customers by being on top of trends before they are," adds Gong.

But change is a constant.

"As our older customers retired, their children started shopping with us," he says. "Now their children are coming in and they have different needs than their parents and grandparents," noting that stores have remained strong in meat, deli, bakery and produce over the years by having the freshest and most in-demand items like free-range chickens, grass-fed beef and local dairy products along with a large selection of other natural, organic and gluten-free products.

"Many consumers today are more sophisticated than their predecessors — especially the younger millennial shoppers," Gong says, "Five years ago, customers in the meat department would ask how to cook an item. They weren't as savvy as years past when mothers taught daughters how to cook."

Gong believes the growth of television cooking shows has created more interest among younger people who don't want to eat out all the time or simply can't afford the luxury.

"This is a trend that won't go away soon and it's helping a lot of stores boost their volume," Gong says.

"Our associates, past, present and future have made us what we are today," he says "We would not be where we are today. They have helped toward the success and goals that we have accomplished."

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But it's a moving target, according to the company co-owner.

"You need to keep on top of trends and if you blink you can miss an important one," Gong warns. "These changes also mean that what was hot yesterday may not be as important down the road. For example, carbonated beverages have declined a bit from where they once were and you see water category growing. Now take organic and gluten-free products that have been big buzzwords for quite a while, shows no signs of fading."

Gong says that one consistent trend is that customer lifestyles are on the go.

"It doesn't matter who or where you are, our job is to get consumers in the store, get their baskets loaded and get them out and on their way as quickly as possible so they can pick up their kids at soccer practice and get dinner ready at home," Gong says. "Prepared foods certainly come into the picture, but people still like to prepare things themselves and it's our job to help them do that."

And the stores are doing just that.

G&G's Petaluma store has 55,000 square feet of selling space and contains virtually every department and new item that customers could want.

"In today's market small is big," he says. "Store size is simply not as important as it was in the past. Petaluma is very tuned in to today's marketplace. There is some room for expansion inside the store and



new departments but people like the idea that they can get in and out more quickly than in other stores."

While Gong and his staff take pride in their attention to customers and the market, he also credits wholesalers like Unified Grocers, Inc. and Tony's Fine Foods for keeping the stores on track.

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"They are playing an increasingly important role," Gong says. "I believe that independents are only as strong as their wholesalers and vendors."

Speaking of his California Grocers Association membership, Gong says he is increasingly dependent on its government relations component. He also cites the CGA's newly formed Independent Operator Committee as a valuable resource. This resulted from the recent merger of CGA and CIGA (California Independent Grocers Association).

"There's a tremendous amount of legislative activity going on and it's difficult for a smaller operator to deal with it on his own," he says. "CGA keeps us in the loop on everything that's going on and we make out better as a group." ■

