

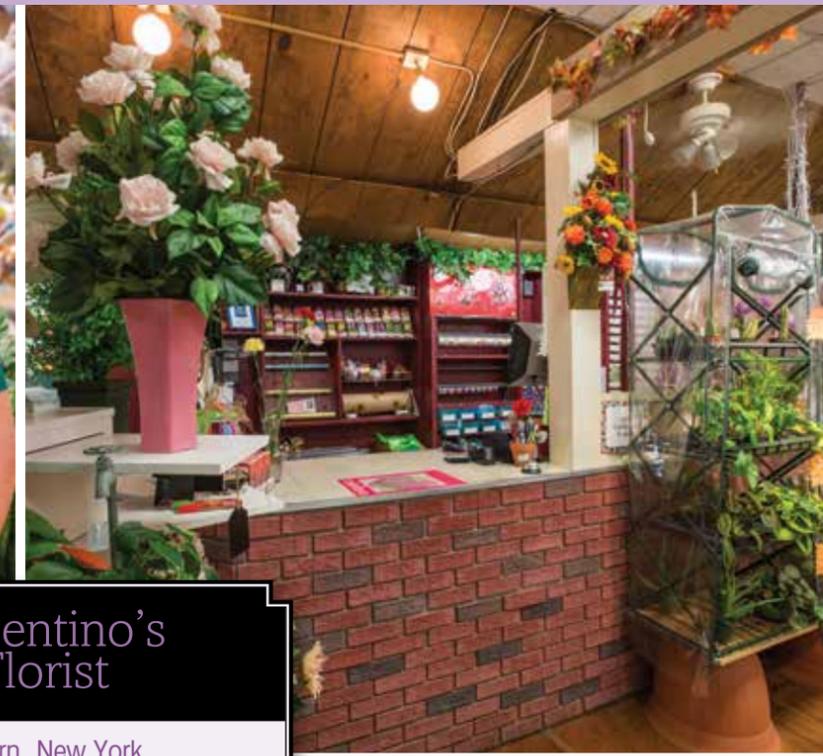
One of the industry's best-known floral businesses readies for a generational switch.

As Cosentino's Florist in Auburn, New York, leans into its third generation, father Carmen and daughter Jessica navigate a slow, well-planned transition of ownership. "My taking over the business is a work in progress," says Jessica. "When people in the business see me they ask, 'Has he given you the shop yet?' I always say no, but it's in the works; we're planning year-by-year, and each year we do a little more."

Jessica's desire to carry on the family business came later in life. Growing up with parents who were always working, even on Christmas morning, she wanted nothing to do with the family business and pursued a career in social services. All that changed about ten years ago. "Now I understand the hard work and the reward," she says.

Cosentino's was founded in 1934, in the depths of the Depression, by Carmen's parents Carmine and Phyllis Cosentino. They rented a greenhouse for \$200 a year from a wealthy man who gave them a sharecropping-type arrangement: in exchange for growing roses and grapes for the owner's home, they could use the rest of the greenhouses to grow their own flowers for sale. In 1940 the Cosentinos

Still located on the same property where the business was founded more than 90 years ago, Cosentino's remains a thriving, dynamic flower shop under the leadership of Carmen (second generation) and Jessica (third). At near right, the wedding consultation area includes a large computer monitor for surfing Pinterest and other sites.



Cosentino's
Florist

Auburn, New York

Owner: Carmen Cosentino AAF, PFCI

Niche: All-around florist with strong sympathy business

Number of employees: 5 full time, 3 part-time

Square footage: showroom, 2,700 square feet; design and storage, 2,500

www.cosentinosflorist.com





Like so many flower shops, Cosentino's began as a greenhouse operation primarily and continues to maintain one greenhouse today (above) as a holding spot for green and blooming plants. The shop is focused, however, on fresh-flower arrangements and related services, with just one important area of diversification: it is famous for 18 flavors of delicious home-made fudge, sold at the counter seen opposite, at far right.

purchased the property, and the business remains at the same location to this day.

Carmen and his wife Anne Marie took the reins in 1962 and over the years have transitioned the business from a greenhouse operation into a retail flower shop. Today, the one remaining greenhouse is used to hold flowering and foliage plants for sale.

Carmen grew up in the business and loved it, but his parents had other plans. "It was a very tough business in those early days," explains Carmen. "My parents told me to stay away because it was hard work with long hours and devoid of vacation time, with no opportunity to travel or meet interesting people. So I graduated from Cornell University and started classes at the Pennsylvania School of Dentistry. After five months I knew where I really wanted to be."

Returning to the shop, Carmen lived a

life quite different from the one his parents described. "They were wrong about the flower business," he concludes. "I've traveled a lot, met very interesting people, and have had many exceptional experiences like helping to decorate the White House at Christmas and being on the team that designed flowers for three presidential inaugurations. In retrospect, I did exactly what I wanted and was very successful at it."

A 15-year relationship working for AFS (American Floral Services) under the guidance of AFS president, later Teleflora chairman, Tom Butler AAF, PFCI assured that Carmen traveled widely. "In the '90s I worked for AFS, mostly on the road doing seminars—about 200 in all," Carmen recalls. "But then Tom said he needed me in-house in Oklahoma City because they were going to start doing computer education. So I commuted from New York to Oklahoma City Monday through Friday helping to develop educational programs. My wife, Anne Marie, ran the shop."

SUCCESSION AND SUCCESS A distinct division of labor is one of the keys to father-daughter success on the job. "I do business management, advertising, and accounting," Carmen explains. "Jessica runs the shop, manages staff, designs, and takes care of families for weddings and funerals. Working with people is her strong point."

Both father and daughter have given a great deal of consideration to the challenge of working together successfully and planning the transfer of ownership. "Any time you have family working there should always be planning and communication, especially when long-term plans are at stake," says Jessica. "In addition to a very big age gap and different educational backgrounds, my father and I also have different ideas and values when it comes to running a business. All these differences can create a lot of problems. We have used programs and webinars from SAF [the Society of American Florists], Teleflora, and AFS as well as TeamFloral to come together, bettering ourselves individually, our father-daughter relationship, and our boss-employee relationship while developing business skills."

The transfer of responsibilities was accelerated for Jessica four years ago when her mother died unexpectedly. "She was a big part of this flower shop," she says, "and when I took over her work I realized how many hats she wore."

For Jessica it brought home the intergenerational aspect of the business. "Many of our families have been with us for decades. We have clients for whom we've done three generations of weddings. My grandmother did the grandmother's wedding flowers, my mom did her daughter's,

and now I'm doing the granddaughter's. She brought in pictures so we could replicate her mother's bouquet."

To facilitate wedding consultations in the age of the Internet, Cosentino's has a newly designed bridal consultation area with a large computer monitor where Jessica and brides can share ideas and search Pinterest for more.

Father and daughter are both noted experts in the floral industry, and both feel their industry involvement has helped the shop flourish. "Our growth over the years has depended on it," says Carmen. "Meeting people, going to seminars, working with Teleflora and SAF and going to the conventions: that's where the ideas come from. We keep adapting ideas from the industry to our own needs. We have become friends with some of the leaders in the industry over the years and it's helped us a great deal. If florists want growth over the years, they need to be involved in the industry."

Jessica is quite involved also, currently serving as Teleflora's Upstate New York Unit President and serving on the Retailers Council and the Government Relations Committee at SAF.

SYMPATHY AND SERVICE As the shop enters its third generation, it does so in a community in which the population is ag-

ing, a situation that brings both opportunities and concerns. Located in the Finger Lakes area of New York with a population of 28,000, Auburn is a bedroom community to Syracuse 20 miles away and has only three major employers of its own.

Cosentino's serves a larger area of about 40,000 people that affords an ample supply of sympathy work (about 30 percent of the shop's business)—and, because the area is a growing tourist and wedding destination, a busy wedding business as well. Eventually the sympathy business will decline, so lately, Carmen and Jessica are placing more emphasis on weddings and events.

Ironically, Carmen finds that sympathy work has the potential for repeat business. "When one family member dies, usually two or three will follow within the next few years," he explains. "We send the family a laminated copy of the obituary with the twenty-third psalm on the other side as well as names and addresses of senders to facilitate sending acknowledgements. If they lose another loved one they have the obit handy and don't have to start over putting together the survivor list, plus the Cosentino phone number is in their hands."

Sympathy work requires exceptional people skills, something at which Jessica excels. "I deal with people in bereavement every day; someone has lost a wife, a

daughter, a mother," she says. "Turning a frown into a smile under these circumstances is very difficult. Whenever I'm having a tough time with the work I do, I think of a 19-year-old woman who was killed by a drunk driver as she was driving back to college. When her family came in they were very sad, reserved and hurt, but by the time they left they were more at ease and gave me a big hug. That's when I know I've done my job and it means more to me than anything else I do."

TRACKING SATISFACTION At Cosentino's, customer experience feedback is sought out and acted upon. "We maintain an 'incident' file where any customer issue is recorded and discussed at our staff meetings," says Carmen. "We have a procedure manual that is updated every year from the incident reports. We also call senders asking for comments about our service. And five days after the delivery we call recipients to see how the flowers are holding up. We try to make five to ten calls a week."

FUDGE FACTOR With very little walk-in business and considerable competition from big retailers, Carmen doesn't invest much in gift lines. However, Cosentino's has developed a popular line of homemade fudge that has become a signature product. "We make 18 different flavors of fudge in

shop profile



An in-store photo studio allows Cosentino's to add original, custom designs to the shop's website, along with options like stuffed animals ("Cosentino's Zoo") and gift baskets. Cosentino's robust presence on the internet reflects Carmen's background as one of the first in the industry to develop computer education programs for florists, working with Tom Butler AAF, PFCI during the '90s.

our state-inspected kitchen, and we switch out flavors from time to time," Carmen explains. "Customers really like it and it makes a great add-on sale of \$4 to \$10. Chocolate Walnut is the favorite flavor, followed by Rocky Road, Rum Raisin (we use real rum) and Pumpkin and Peanut Butter. A lot of people walk in just to buy our fudge."

COMMUNITY LOVE Cosentino's hosted successful holiday open houses for many years, but as malls moved into the area attendance began to dwindle. Looking for another way to show the shop's Christmas spirit, Carmen came up with the idea of hosting free "gala" evenings for local charitable groups. The galas are free to the non-profits, who then sell \$10 tickets to the public. They take place in the evenings at the festively decorated shop, where guests are served wine and hors d'oeuvres while

being treated to design demonstrations and shop tours. Cosentino's supplies all the food and beverages, and in return the shop enjoys enthusiastic word-of-mouth advertising, local media coverage, and good will in the community.

"We host eight to ten gala events around Christmastime, and each one brings in between 25 and 60 people," Carmen explains. "The galas raise a lot of money for the charities—up to about \$5,000—and we get great coverage in *The Citizen*, our local paper."

Cosentino's relationship with *The Citizen* is a testament to the value of a local newspaper to businesses in a small community. For the last eight years Carmen has been contributing a weekly column titled "Flowers, Plants and Things," in which he offers advice on topics that range from pruning roses or re-blooming that poinsettia to ruminations on how the floral industry has changed over the years. He finds that the grind of generating new story ideas is nicely offset by the fact that it keeps him in the minds of readers as an expert. Jessica is president of the local chapter of Zonta, a service organization for women, and writes a column once a month about its activities. Furthermore, the paper's readers have voted Cosentino's "Best Florist in the Region" for 16 of the last 18 years. "Knowing that we are the best florist in the area is an impor-

tant motivator," says Carmen. "There is no doubt about that."

KUDOS WELL DESERVED As he looks toward retirement, Carmen Cosentino has many accolades to be proud of. He was named to the Society of American Florist Hall of Fame in 1998; he received the Tommy Bright Award in 2008. Teleflora recently bestowed another award that honors an old friend. In September, Cosentino's Florist became the second annual recipient of the Tom Butler "Floral Retailer of the Year" Award, established by Teleflora to honor the legacy of past chairman Tom Butler by recognizing a retail florist who shows a high level of commitment and service to the local community and provides leadership and guidance to fellow florists. That is a standard that Cosentino's has held up over three generations.

"I am very honored to receive this prestigious award," says Carmen. "Tom was a best friend, mentor and my go-to guy with personal or business problems. I miss Tom."

For Carmen the final challenge is simply letting go. "Jessica and I both are looking forward to my cutting back and placing the whole business in her very capable hands," he says. "And I look forward to the day when the flower shop phone is no longer sitting on my bedside table." 🌸