



## Tasty tradition

Riccardo Merlini, founder of the Merlini company, tells us the story of 60 years dedicated to the difficult sector of food preservation

**T**he name Merlini recalls, by spontaneous association, the famous Merlini mushrooms, with a typical gnome on the label as their logo, which in the meantime has become easy to recognize, like the figure of Carmencita used for coffee. At the same time, Merlini represents a story from Verona, and the background is easy to recognize in close connection with the city. Riccardo Merlini, born in 1935, thinks back with us to old times regarding the family and the company.

### **Did your family already work in the food sector?**

My parents had a little grocery store, first it was on Via Cesare Lombroso and then they moved it to Via Daniele Manin. My father, Riccardo, whose name I inherited, already back then prepared little bags of dried mushrooms, working in the back room. At the same time, he worked as a salesman selling imported cheeses and antipasto delights from Piedmont, in addition to anchovies and sardi-



nes from Sicily.

Since he harbored socialistic ideas, during the war he participated in a movement called *Italia Libera*, and the only reason why he wasn't deported is because he managed to hide, and he did it so well that no-one knew where he was, not even us. After the war, there were trials, and he was summonsed as a witness and as the injured party. The experiences he had been through were surely very disappointing: I remember his imposing figure and wide jaw, in an angry gesture he ripped up his socialist-party membership card, and ordered me, with tears in his eyes, to never get involved in politics, because it's "dirty business".

**Could you tell us more about the war?**

After finishing second grade, I was sent to my aunt Gina's place in Cavaion, where my sisters joined me some months later. My job was to take care of a little dog named Fuffy, six turkeys and horse. We were in an area considered to be a "hot spot", especially during the retreat of the German soldiers. There was always something happening in our courtyard: on several occasions the Blackshirts and the SS came looking for my father, to no avail. I know that he was helped by the Germans themselves, the top officials, because they respected him. During an air raid, six bombs fell on our house in Vicolo Valle, next to Via Scalzi. Thank God, mom wasn't home when it happened. In 1946 my father sold the property in Cavaion, and rebuild the house with the intention of creating a wholesale store for the products he represented. I remember, he would often travel to Trieste, where he had two ladies that supplied him with mushrooms, especially dried ones. During vacation, he would take me for a ride in his green Fiat 501, and later in his 1100. I still have a picture of that car.

**Did you work in the grocery store as a child?**

My father died of a heart attack in 1950, after

building this house, leaving my mother as a widow, racked. The store was just getting started, and she, being very tenacious, managed to run the business together with me pitching in, at the age of 14. My sister, Benvenuta, who went to the renowned Seghetti high school, also worked at the store. Part of the business was a food preservation shop that my father had started, where we preserved mixed vegetables, olives, artichoke hearts, as well as anchovies, sardines and herring. The mushroom part was minimum because consumption was low.

**You mean you were in business at the age of 15?**

The death of my father, which was sudden and dramatic, marked me in an indelible way. I stopped playing at an early age, complaining sometimes, and work became my primary activity. My dream was to build a big company and create jobs for lots of people. Today, I may say I won the challenge, but I can't help thinking about all the things, and much better things, I could have done together with my fa-



*Made in Verona*



ther, if he hadn't been missing, and so soon. In any case, over all these years, I have always felt his presence next to me: the remembrance of his teachings never abandoned me, along with great pride and respect I felt for him. I had just turned 15, and I put my heart and soul into the business. I only took a break after accomplishing my objective, and that's still what I do today. During the 60s, I started traveling to various countries to find mushrooms. The sector turned out to be good business, and stayed that way for over 20 years: it rendered its fruits and made me a little bit famous.

### **What were the main stages in the growth of the company?**

The first step, together with my mother, was to rebuild the old tanning shop in Vicolo Valle. The building is still standing, but nothing is produced there. Now it belongs to my children, and they are renovating to live there, but I'll be staying in Sommacampagna.

Ever since the beginning, I got a great deal of help from my wife, who was actually our first employee. Sooner or later, for logistic reasons, it became absolutely necessary to find a new site for the cannery. After closely examining the different possibilities in the area surrounding Verona, I decided to buy 8000 m<sup>2</sup> in Sommacampagna, which back then was considered to be a depressed area. And then I started to build, first the house, and then the cannery. There was even a fenced in area with chickens. At the same time I would travel around as a merchant. My job consisted of buying, selling and producing: I was really on

the go all the time, and my wife, Maria Antonietta, always helped me. Another person who helped me was Sandro, my brother-in-law, who worked with us for 33 years, and for a while he worked for my sister.

### **How was the company structured?**

Since we were dependent on production cycles, the situation was variable. During artichoke season, for example, we had trucks from Apulia, delivering merchandise that needed to be processed fresh, so we eventually reached a temporary workforce of as many as 80-100 people, whereas the number of our steady employees varied from 20 to 50. A great deal of our market was in Italy and Switzerland. We would distribute both to wholesalers and to chain stores, which in the meantime we have limited. Back then there was great demand for our products, there weren't very many canneries, people had



more appetite, and there was less competition. In a word, business was much easier. During the 60s, 70s and 80s, there was continuous expansion, however now we tend to simply maintain the level we reached. The market has changed, now there are the multinationals, sales contracts are becoming more and more difficult, because buyers always want more and more, such that for small and medium enterprises it's hard to keep up. We have always kept our rhythm, always coming up with new ideas.

### **What about doing business abroad?**

In 1962, I started importing from foreign countries. I started with ex-Yugoslavia, Romania, Hungary and other countries. During

the 90s, I decided to do business with Serbia and Bulgaria, where we now have two good-sized production plants. To work in the mushroom business you need to be strong and have financial backing, as well as willingness to work hard, during the night, being flexible and quick in buying and selling.

**What are the unusual aspects of a company like yours?**

Mushrooms constitute an interesting branch, but it has cost us considerable strength. I've had moments of intense joy, and here I'm not talking about the money. This product does not depend on season, and it has quite precise and unusual characteristics. There is considerable risk involved, as mushrooms are something rather mysterious: you don't plant seeds to grow mushrooms, but they just grow on their own according to the latitude, longitude, form of the hill, etc. Here I'm referring to *porcini* and *galletti*, and obviously not to the classical mushrooms, farm-grown in series. Consequently, to improvise on the logistics and collecting is not that easy.

**How would you describe the state of your company today?**

Currently we are more in production than in sales. We deal in frozen, canned, dried, and when the season is right, fresh products, such as *porcini*. We have a plant in Vicenza and have sorting done in the region of Latina. Our company is a corporation, with a 20 million yearly turnover. I have entrusted the management to my children: Davide is the general director of the company and of production, Diego is the managing director of sales, and Laura is in charge of marketing. My wife and I are all-rounders.

**May I ask you a personal question?**

**When you were a child, did you have a dream you wanted to realize as an adult?**

Not really, I think I have done what I wanted

to do. I'm proud to have done it, and I'm still proud to continue doing it. Perhaps I haven't been sufficiently perspicacious, intelligent and diplomatic, in order to meet the right people and make the right connections, since I'm a bit of an individualist. I would have liked to be more erudite, to speak several languages, and to have time to do so many other things. My job has made me live kind of like a gypsy, depending on instinct, but maybe that's precisely why I am so satisfied and don't regret anything.

**How do you see the future of your company?**

I hope that producers will be required to present their products in a better way, and that it becomes obligatory to declare the origin of the food, in order to get rid of the confusion about using other products, especially without declaring anything. Anyway, I feel optimistic about the future. I think there are great perspectives in international cuisine, and I have great faith in the ability of my children to carry on the company.



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