

Havertown Mainstay Centrella's Deli & Italian Market Expands and Gets a Makeover



When AJ Loustau, at age 24, was looking for a small business to start, he could have ended up anywhere, doing anything. He says, “At the time, whether you were selling Italian hoagies or hair cuts or ice cream, it was small business, that’s what interested me.” How lucky are we that he landed at Centrella’s Deli in Havertown?

Founded in 1975 by John Centrella, the deli was just the kind of thriving business Loustau was looking for in 2010 when Centrella was getting ready to retire. “In high school I worked in kitchens, but after high school I went in the corporate direction for about two years and just did not like it. I was sitting in front of a computer in a cubicle from 8 to 5

and it didn’t matter what I was doing, I just wasn’t cut out for that. So this opportunity came up, the original owner was looking to retire and here I am now, 14 years later.”

Centrella’s is well-known in the area for its menu of hoagies, steak and specialty sandwiches, homemade meatballs, prepared pasta meals and pasta salads as well as baked goods and other sweet treats. In the market area, they sell a wide variety of Italian specialty products including pastas, olive oil, vinaigrettes, pizzelles and more. The deli does take out, catering, and has several tables for eating in.

When neighboring shop Testa’s Bakery closed at the end of 2022, Loustau saw that as a terrific opportunity to expand Centrella’s footprint and their offerings. It was a big undertaking. “The layout was very different,” he says. “There was one extra wall [between the businesses] and breaking through was the biggest part of the project. It was 14” of brick.” The renovation has taken about 4 months. They’re still putting the finishing touches on the place, adding more shelving and decorating. Loustau wants to bring in more shelving and display cases, but sees the business as a continuous work in progress—he’ll always be adding new things and upgrading.



Born and raised in Haddonfield, NJ, Loustau was living in Philadelphia when he found the opportunity at Centrella's. Two years ago, he, his wife and two children (ages 6 and 4) moved to the Chatham Park area and are very happy there. Loustau says, "At one point I remember I didn't want to live in Havertown because I thought I didn't want to work and live in the same town. But then at a certain point it just kind of switched and I thought, why *wouldn't* I want to live here and know everybody—it's nice people, it's a good community, it's good schools, it's beautiful, it's close to Philly—why not? Havertown checks every box, it's a great place to be. We love it."

When asked what he felt was unique about Havertown, Loustau was quick to say, "Best deli in Pennsylvania, come on, that's an easy one!" And then added, "It's definitely the customers, the community. I've said for a while, I don't know that I would want to do this anywhere else - I know my customers, I know their kids, they know me, they know my kids, it's just a great place to do business. People in Havertown support Havertown businesses. I don't think you get that everywhere. The sense of community...I think that is definitely unique to Havertown."

Centrella's Deli currently employs about 20 people with about 12 full time employees, the rest being high school students who do prep work and cleaning. Loustau says it's a tight little family. He credits some of the long time employees with helping with the transition when he first bought the business and was going through growing pains. He says, "It was a little rocky at the start, but there were some very established people here who helped and made it as smooth as possible."



Loustau says he's always looking toward the future. With all the new space, he's excited about offering new products in the coming year. "We still have the ovens from Testa's," he says, "big brick ovens that are very cool and it would be a crime not to use them. Someone needs to come out and get them hooked up, but we're chomping at the bit to use that for stromboli, pizza, bread; that kind of stuff would be the biggest next horizon."

Additionally, Centrella's carries an incredible array of delicious baked goods. Loustau noted "We're doing the simpler stuff in house—cookies, muffins, brownies and that kind of stuff. The really delicate pastries come from Isgro's, a 120-year-old bakery in the Italian market. The limoncello and the rum squares and the tiramisu cups, they're making it down there and they come out here and deliver it to us. We're doing that with a bunch of things. We carry Stock's pound cakes—why try to make our own pound cakes when we can get Stock's? If somebody else can do it better than us, just let them do it. Sell their stuff. There's no ego or anything like that. Do what you can do in house and bring in the other stuff from elsewhere."

Would he ever expand by adding another store? “People ask that a lot,” Loustau remarked. “I’m not saying no, it’s not like a hard no. I like being here, I’m here almost every day. If you have another location, you’re not. It doesn’t excite me as much to have multiple locations, I’d rather just keep growing on this one.”

When asked about his favorites at the deli, Loustau said, “I love our eggplant parm, our meatballs, the hot roast beef...it’s kind of hard because I like all of them. And I get to determine what goes into the recipes.” Does he cook at home? “I love cooking but when I get home, I don’t cook Italian food! I love making my kids breakfast, anything that’s not lasagnas and meatballs and baked ziti. I definitely go in a different direction than what we do here.” Odds are, what he cooks at home tastes pretty great, too!



Centrella’s Deli & Italian Market is located at 10 Brookline Boulevard in Havertown. To learn more about their offerings, visit their website at [Centrella's Deli and Italian Market](#), follow on Instagram @centrellasdeli and Facebook @centrellasdeli.