

# Top Tomato stands up to supermarket rivals



Devin Loring, @DevinLoring

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(Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

Top Tomato (<http://toptomatosuperstore.com/>), a family-owned supermarket, measures its success in food.

In the week leading up to last Christmas, the chain sold 15,000 pounds of Italian butter cookies. On Christmas Day, the Freehold Township store sold 8,500 loaves of Italian bread by 1 p.m., and in a regular week, that store will sell 2,500 prepared entrees.

"Everyone loves Italian food. I think it's the most widely eaten food in the entire world," Anthony Sciandra said. His family is in its third generation of ownership of Top Tomato. The first store opened in 1979, and only sold produce.

Top Tomato is a six-store supermarket chain that has two locations in New Jersey — Brick and Freehold Township. The rest are in Staten Island.



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## Specialty Italian

The Freehold Township location opened about five years ago at 200 Mounts Corner Drive, in a former Acme. The Brick location opened in 2008.

"Anytime you're known as a specialty shop or gourmet store, right away (customers) affiliate us with high prices," Sciandra said. "We're kind of in the middle. We're that gourmet store but we have the cheaper pricing."

The specialty label comes with the territory of baking and cooking "90 percent" of prepared and baked foods in-house.

Everything — from the variety of breads to the Italian sauces to the prepared entrées — is made on-site using Sciandra's mother's recipes.

"My mother will work here for the week of Christmas. Believe it or not she will actually be in the kitchen," Sciandra said. "Being involved — she really enjoys it, and it's a large part of our business."

Salvatore Sciandra opened the first Top Tomato 1979 in Staten Island.

"And just one store led to another and another — it kept going, thank God," his son Anthony Sciandra said.

The chain grew throughout Staten Island and Anthony's grandfather and uncle also got involved in the business. When Staten Island became "saturated" with Top Tomato, Sciandra said the business trickled into New Jersey.



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(<http://www.app.com/story/news/local/eatontown-asbury-park/long-branch/2015/10/11/columbus-day-parade-italian-american/73594620/>)



**Margarito Tepale of Freehold, baker, prepares fresh loaves of bread for the oven at Top Tomato Super Store in Freehold Township. (Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)**

### **Lines out the door**

Since opening in Freehold Township, a few things have changed at the store. For one, the bakery and the meat department have switched.

The lines of holiday shoppers waiting for Italian bread, winding almost out of the front door, obviously didn't work for the previous layout, Sciandra said.

All of the supermarket's bread, which comes out of the oven three times a day, used to be baked in Brooklyn.

"We found a way to get Brooklyn water here, so we don't lose the flavor," Sciandra said. "We bake all our bread and it tastes identical to Brooklyn bread."

And, yes, Brooklyn water is different.

"We tried making bread here for months (without success) before we finally switched over when we found a way to actually duplicate Brooklyn water."



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Anthony Sciandra of Holmdel, owner, and Joseph Milazzo of Staten Island, store manager, ice fresh wild salmon from Alaska at the Top Tomato Super Store in Freehold Township. (Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

### Difficult business

The trial and error of making the Italian bread is demonstrative of the learning curve that comes with operating an independent supermarket.

A Top Tomato in Atlantic Highlands that opened in August 2014 closed four months later. Sciandra said the town was too quiet to keep up with the amount of volume needed to sustain a supermarket with fresh produce.

"The equation didn't work for us," he said. "When you have a store that's not doing the volume, it becomes so much more difficult to manage the store in terms of ordering too much and selling enough."

Supermarkets are difficult to manage due to a host of different factors like perishable departments, unions and labor rates, said Matthew Casey, of Matthew P. Casey Associates in Clark.

"For smaller chains or independents, it's a very, very, difficult landscape to compete in," Casey said.

Still, Sciandra said Top Tomato will expand when the time is right.

"We don't have anything in the works as of right now, but obviously with A&P and Pathmark going out of business, there will be a lot of spots that are available," he said. "when we find something that we like and it's right price, maybe we can fit in there."



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[What will happen to 5 local A&Ps, Pathmarks?](#)

<http://www.app.com/story/money/business/main-street/2015/08/13/ap-pathmark-closes-supermarkets/31628719/>



**Silvia Lopez of Freehold, baker, prepares Italian butter cookies with jelly at the Top Tomato Super Store in Freehold Township. (Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)**

### **More than the food**

“I am a favorite customer of Top Tomato, I love this store,” said Dave Waters of Freehold Township.

Upon entering the supermarket, Waters immediately shook hands with Anthony Sciandra and then fell into conversation with Stephen Sciandra, Anthony’s brother and store manager.

Waters is originally from Brooklyn, so he already knew about Top Tomato when he moved to Freehold, due to its Staten Island presence.

“I noticed this one driving around Freehold, and I said I have to stop in there, and I’ve been coming ever since,” Waters said.

But it’s more than the produce, meat, and prices — which Waters stresses he loves — that attract him to the supermarket.

“I did not know any of the (Sciandras) before, but Steve and I ... just hit it off. I like to see the younger people using their smarts,” Waters said. “I’ve been coming here for years now, and I talk to Joe (meat department manager), I talk to Stephen, I talk to everybody, even Big Sal, the owner.”

Stephen Sciandra, 28, said he “only knows one thing, and that’s the retail business.”

The Sciandras have been in the supermarket business for Stephen’s whole life. He started working when he was about 14 years old.

“I basically started from the bottom up,” Sciandra said. “Anything to basically help my family, you know?”

Oct. 18 is customer appreciation day at Top Tomato Freehold from noon to 4 p.m. Stop by to meet the next generation of Top Tomato, and enjoy free cider, coffee, and fresh-made donuts.

*Devin Loring; 732-643-4035; dloring@app.com*



Examples of homemade sauces available at the Top Tomato Super Store in Freehold Township. (Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

## TOP TOMATO SUPER STORE

### New Jersey locations:

- 200 Mounts Corner Drive, Freehold Township, 732-462-4600
- 515 Brick Blvd., Brick, 732-262-5111

**Website:** [www.toptomatosuperstore.com](http://www.toptomatosuperstore.com) (<http://www.toptomatosuperstore.com>)

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Exterior of the Top Tomato Super Store in Freehold Township. (Photo: TANYA BREEN/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER)

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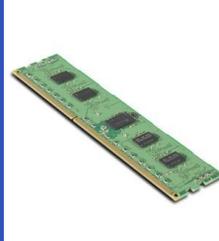


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