



Market value

The TOSCANO family enjoys sharing the fruits of their labours. By SARAH MOORE

For three generations, food has been pivotal to the Toscano family. When Joe Toscano first visited the Italian seaside village where his father, Pasquale, grew up, he asked why he had never mentioned how stunning it was. His father replied: "It's hard to appreciate the view when you have an empty stomach."

These days the Toscano family name is synonymous with quality fresh produce.

In 1926 Pasquale Toscano came to Melbourne from Ferruzzano, in Calabria, south-eastern Italy, seeking a better life. Australia proved bountiful for the hard-working migrant and, after buying his first fruit shop in the 1930s, he opened the first Toscano's store with wife Nunziata in 1960.

Now a local institution, Toscano's of Kew is quadruple the size of the original shop and has stores in Richmond and Hawksburn.

In her new book *Toscano's Family Table*, Joanne Toscano recounts her grandparents' story and how food transformed life for the Toscano family. She has also compiled treasured family recipes with a comprehensive guide to buying, storing and preparing fruit and vegetables.

Each member of the Toscano family has played a part in the success of the business. Joe, 69, and his wife, Anne, their four

children - Joanne, Danielle, Damien and Patrick - uncle Bob, aunt Teresa and cousin Dominic continue the family tradition established by Pasquale and Nunziata.

Kew locals have been enjoying the fruits of the Toscanos' labour for decades. Although Joe no longer puts in the 80-100 hours a week he once did, he follows the same early-morning routine he has had since he was a lad. Going to

bed at 7.30pm and rising for the working day before dawn won't appeal to everyone, but for Joe there is no other way.

At 2.45am, it's a brisk seven degrees and the moon still rules the night sky but in Templestowe, Joe is getting out of bed, as he has done for 56 years, to secure the best quality fruit and vegetables at the wholesale market. He visits Footscray market four



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LEFT TO RIGHT: Joe and Joanne Toscano in the Kew store; Joanne's grandfather, Pasquale Toscano; Joanne, Joe, Anne, Patrick and Damien

at Footscray wholesale market at 4.30am every Tuesday and Wednesday, an hour later than on the busier market days. Dressed in long pants for one of the first chilly mornings of the year, with a fluorescent orange vest over a worn leather apron, Joe is ready to do business.

"I feel naked without it," he says of the durable leather apron traditionally worn to carry boxes of fruit. Its plentiful pockets are stuffed with buying lists, receipts, mobile phone and a knife for sampling produce.

Joe greets the sellers with a handshake and a smile as he does his rounds, stopping to check the quality and freshness of his orders while dodging forklifts. He pauses to inspect produce, tasting a slice of cantaloupe and taking a deep inhalation from a punnet of the last raspberries for the season.

Joe is clearly respected by his fellow buyers as well as the growers and merchants.

"We're all hard-working people and we're serious about what we do," he says. "We may argue about a dollar but in the end we're friends."

Joe stops for a short macchiato with a friend – drunk standing up in true Italian style – before a chat and a handful of blistering roasted chestnuts at another stall.

The camaraderie is palpable. Joe knows the business like the back of his hand, and he says that apart from his family it's his reason to live. "I love the place, it's my life," he says of the workplace he has been frequenting for more than half a century. "They reckon it gets in your blood."

Before day breaks at 6am, the

orders are finalised, the buying is complete and Joe heads to the loading bay where the trucks are stacked with pallets and boxes of produce ready to deliver to the three Toscano's shops. Joe follows and checks in at each store, overseeing the delivery and display of the new stock.

Final inspections completed, Joe hands over the reins to his sons and staff and returns home for a serve of toast and fresh tomato with salt and pepper.

Joanne Toscano is familiar with the early mornings of the wholesale market, having bought flowers for the family business for many years. The eldest child of Joe and Anne, she started out in the family shop at 14 and has fond memories of changing the gears on the old truck on the way to the wholesale markets with her dad during school holidays.

Having spent most of her adult life working in the flagship Kew store, Joanne, 42, is inseparable from the family business. And food, Joanne says, is central to most of the Toscanos' conversations.

"My husband's not at all [interested in food], he's Australian and his family just eat to get full; but when we eat, we savour everything," she says.

"Even though we work together we still see a lot of each other [outside of work] and we're always sharing food together."

Joanne's love of food reaches as far back as she can recall.

"I used to love cooking with mum, especially cakes and biscuits when I was younger, but as I got older I loved the savoury side of things," she says. "I also remember mum getting frustrated with how much mess I would make!"

"Joanne was good on the tooth!" adds Joe.

The book *Toscano's Family Table* grew out of Joanne's knowledge and love of food, which had already landed her a regular segment on Saturday morning ABC radio.

Sharing tips on how best to select and store seasonal produce with suggested recipes is an extension of family life for Joanne.

Although she relished creating the vegetable guide and documenting her family's recipes, learning about her family history was a highlight.

"I really wish I'd done it years ago when I think dad would have remembered more, but also when my grandmother was still alive," she says.

Her grandmother never

owned a cookbook. She passed on her own recipes to Joanne's mother, who in turn shared them with her daughters.

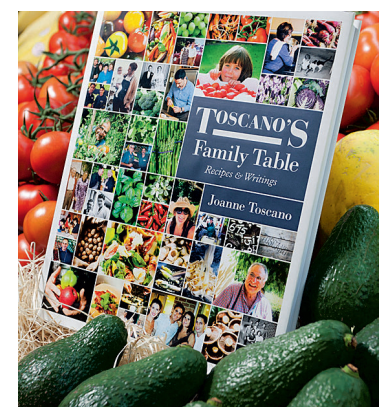
"Whenever my sister [Danielle] or I go anywhere, they'll ask us to bring eggplant parmigiana, and if we're having a barbecue that'll be the dish that mum brings," Joanne says of one of her favourite recipes from the book.

"It's one of those sharing dishes and I love eggplant, it's luscious."

Joanne says the key to the book is simple: "We're not chefs, we're not cooks and I'm not even a writer really."

"We're just people who like food and we wanted to get [across] that simple message that we try to give in the shop."

"Eating good food doesn't have to be expensive or difficult – you just buy stuff in season and cook with a bit of love."



ARI HATZIS



FRESH: Find recipes for a fig salad and custard tart in *Toscano's Family Table*, \$50 from Slattery Media Group

mornings a week, and sons Damien and Patrick continue the six-day working weeks that Joe inherited from his father. Even before he is dressed, Joe is on his mobile phone to the growers and merchants unloading their produce. When he has a feel for what's available and what the prices are, he fits in some exercise before getting ready to head to market.

The boom gate swings open