

The Yo-Yo ride is aptly named

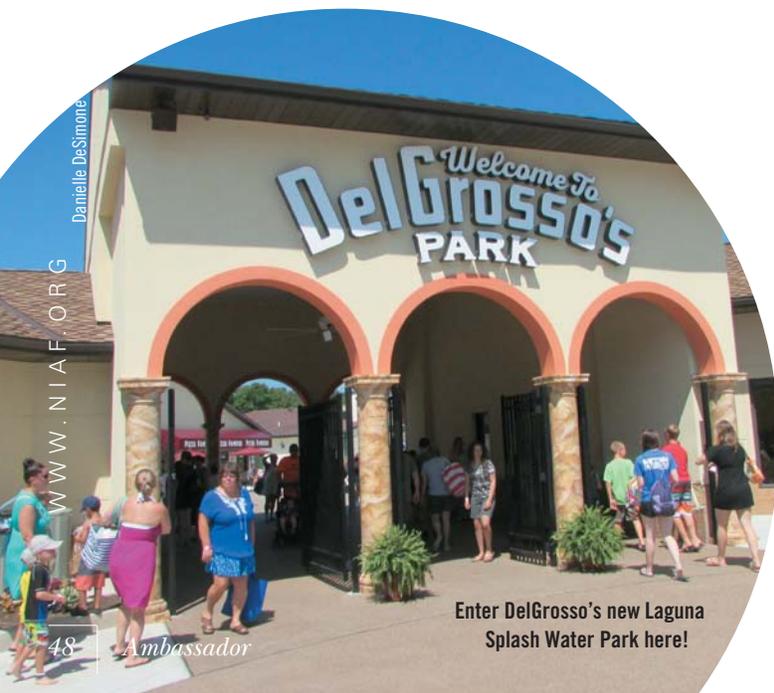


Danielle DeSimone

# Beyond the Sauce

## The DelGrosso Family's Wild Ride

By Danielle DeSimone



Enter DelGrosso's new Laguna Splash Water Park here!

**M**ost people know the name DelGrosso as synonymous with fine Italian pasta sauce. But, unless you're from central Pennsylvania, you may not know the same DelGrosso family has owned and operated its own amusement park since 1946.

The oldest, major family-owned manufacturer of pasta sauce in the United States, DelGrosso has built a business empire by embracing

the values, traditions and dedication to family handed down from past generations and passing it along to the next. In fact, today, the business is run by four generations of the family who still work hard to assure success—but manage to have fun doing it!

The DelGrosso legacy is a long one, dating back to the early 1900's, when a large influx of Italian immigrants arrived on America's shores. Like most Italian

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stories, this one begins with love: a young woman named Mafalda (affectionately called “Murph”) married a man named Ferdinand (“Fred”) DelGrosso in the small, rural, Pennsylvania town of Altoona, and the rest is pasta-lovers’ history.

In 1943, Fred and Murph opened DelGrosso Café in downtown Altoona, serving what soon became known as “the best spaghetti in town,” largely due to the passed-down tomato sauce recipe from Murph’s mother, Marianna. The sauce was so popular that customers brought home extra jars after dining at the restaurant.

Three years later, the DelGrosso couple sold their café and purchased an amusement park just down the road, where they continued to serve their popular Italian dishes to

even then, had a habit of helping those in need, at one point more than 11 people squeezed into the tiny house, taking in orphans and priests from the local parish.

“My grandparents really didn’t have much,” Carl DelGrosso, president of the DelGrosso Amusement Park, said recently at the park. “But they always found room to give.”

The DelGrosso children spent their childhoods running wild through the amusement park—their own, rollercoaster-filled backyard. When they weren’t playing, they were working, assisting their parents in running the park’s rides and concession stands.

From the cramped park kitchen, the DelGrossos began making and canning their own tomato sauce commercially, with the children pitching in, typically working 10-hour days. In the 1950s, the family expanded its factory, and the team effort paid off. “DelGrosso” quickly became a household name in central Pennsylvania. Today,

its classic DelGrosso labels are recognized nationwide.

Nowadays, the amusement park and sauce factory would be unrecognizable to Murph and Fred. Once booming with turn-of-the-century railroad business, these rolling Rust Belt hills have since quieted—except for the burst of life along that stretch of land just outside of Tipton, Pa., where delighted squeals of children and the whirling music from the roller coasters can be heard before you even see it.

And, what was once just a small, humble family amusement park in the 1940’s has expanded to include the DelGrosso Amusement Park, the Italian-themed Laguna Water Park, and the DelGrosso Sauce Factory. Although the park is much larger than it once was, the small

**Above: The Lazy River at Laguna Splash Water Park.**  
**Below Left: Murph’s Kitchen**  
**Below: Vintage 1970s DelGrosso family photo**



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park patrons.

It wasn’t easy. Fred and Murph had seven children—many of whom still work in the family business. The family of nine lived near the back of the amusement park property in a red-brick cabin so small that their kitchen was in a different building. And, since the DelGrossos,



Courtesy of the DelGrosso family

town carnival feel is still everywhere. From families with small children riding an antique carousel, to the park employees greeting guests by their first names, you can’t help but immediately feel comfortable at the tree-lined park.

And of course, there’s the food. True to ➤



Left: An early photo of Fred and Murph at their sauce factory.

Right: Aunt Mary Ann Crider and Michael DelGrosso, vice president of Global Sales & Marketing at DelGrosso Foods.

Below: The DelGrosso Sauce Factory today



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tradition, the DelGrossos have incorporated their family sauce and recipes into all of the food menus here. Amusement parks are not normally remembered for their stellar food, but DelGrosso's is. Park guests enjoy everything from homemade meatballs smothered in the DelGrosso signature Aunt Mary Ann's Sunday Marinara sauce to fusilli twirled in Uncle Joe's Vodka Celebration sauce.

Behind the kiosk windows of Murph's Kitchen, one of the park's 14 eateries and snack bars, located near the Kiddie Carousel, the Gift Shop, and the Rock Star and Paratrooper rides, is a bustling kitchen where a crew chops vegetables, stirs bubbling sauces, and builds stacked sandwiches like an assembly line. Even the potato salad here is special, made with Murph's secret recipe, and eaten with a cult-like reverence.

Obviously, Murph's Kitchen is named after the DelGrosso matriarch, Murph, so it seems appropriate that everything cooking there now falls under the watchful eye of Aunt Mary Ann herself, a self-proclaimed "retired working woman" and Murph's daughter. She exudes a certain Old World charm as she fusses around the kitchen, inspecting the Bolognese sauce, offering constructive

criticism here and there with her personal adage, "If it's the truth, you can say it!"

Aunt Mary Ann has her quieter moments as well, such as when she hands half of her uneaten sandwich to a park guest she doesn't know saying, "Here, I'm not going to finish this, do you want it?" Or when she quietly approaches park guests who look like they might "need a little extra help" and offers free strips of tickets to rides, just as her father famously did before her.

Italian American traditions live and breathe here—not just in the food passed down and shared with others, but in the generosity and sense of community.

Across East Pleasant Valley Boulevard is the DelGrossos' newest attraction: the expanded and renovated Laguna Splash Water Park where you can slip down a Venetian gondola slide, run under a 25-foot-tall leaning Tower of Pisa fountain, or cruise along the River Lazio. It's America's only Italian-themed water park!

Here, too, is all of DelGrosso's delicious Italian American food, with regional influences evident in the hoagies, and sausage and peppers. And, next door, the sauce factory continues to churn out the old family recipes into, on average, 240,000-270,000 polished jars daily, even meatballs, all



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made with fresh ingredients and with an emphasis on quality and flavor.

Meanwhile, the DelGrossos remain close-knit. Most of the family members work, or have worked, in the park or the factory at some point during their lives. It's almost a rite of passage for teenage DelGrossos to work concession stands or ride-ticket counters. They all still come together on Sundays for a family meal, and the Feast of the Seven Fishes continues to be a crowd favorite.

When asked whether younger generations of the DelGrosso family will carry on the traditions of the park, Carl DelGrosso smiled. "When you grow up from the ground level and you see the amount of work that is put into building a place like this by your grandparents, and then your parents, and you've seen their vision and the risks that they took to build it," he said, "You're far more invested in making sure the place survives because you don't want all of their hard work to fail."

The DelGrosso Amusement Park is more than just a collection of roller coast-

ers and carnival rides, and food stands with incredible meatballs and Italian sandwiches. It is a family place that has contributed to a tight-knit community here.

There is no better evidence of this than the park's Spaghetti Wednesdays, the weekly, moderately priced, pasta specials the DelGrossos serve from mid-June to mid-August, which attract hundreds of locals.

The line can sometimes be hours-long, but the wait is worth it. Not only do guests get to dig into a dish of DelGrosso's homemade recipes with their signature sauces, they come together, sitting on long, extended benches, pausing in their busy lives to dine across the table from family, friends, neighbors or strangers, sharing a meal filled with raucous, joyful conversation. It's Italian American culture at its best. It's a legacy the La Famiglia DelGrosso's Italian ancestors would have been proud of. ▲

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