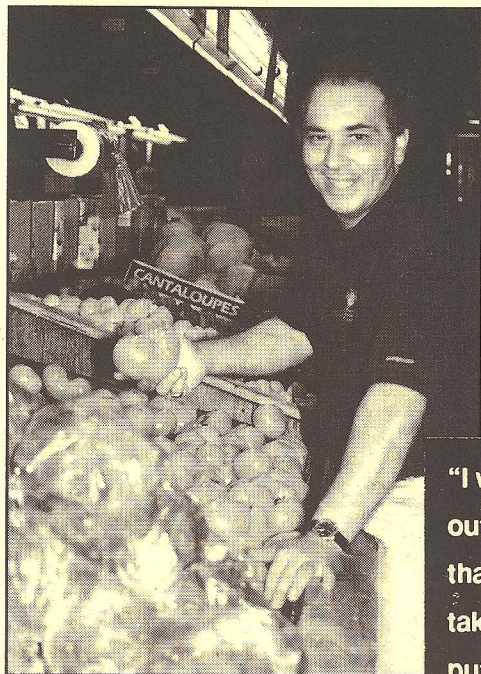


# BOB PALMISANO

He's an H. Ross Perot disguised as an Italian Mama... and he makes the Newtown Farm Market tick



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Bob Palmisano

By Rose Huber  
Features Writer  
For EastSide Weekend

Fruit and vegetable crackerjack Bob Palmisano is a modern-day enigma.

On the one hand he runs his business with the aplomb and shrewdness of a Harvard Business School grad. He's the CEO making strategic decisions, dictating the design of his products, applying demanding tests of quality control, researching and catering to the desires and needs of his targeted market.

On the other hand he admittedly longs for the good old days when life was less complicated and "people were people and not numbers."

It's the latter part of Palmisano's personality that permeates the inviting

atmosphere created at the Newtown Farm Market (formerly Aichholz's Farm Market, a Newtown landmark for decades).

Years ago, he says, "business people knew their customers. They let them know they appreciated their business. Remember when we used to get stamps and a free glass for shopping?" he asks. "Today we don't even get a thank you in some places. I liked the smallness of the old days — the butcher shop, the bakery, the deli. I miss that."

That's why when he took over Aichholz's three years ago, Palmisano made a commitment to keep up the tradition of quality and service for which Aichholz were known. "Nothing has changed along," he says. "We're just growing and getting even better."

As the Aichholz family did before him, the long-time fruit and vegetable pro (He was originally co-owner of and buyer

for Jungle Jim's in Fairfield) brings only the best and freshest produce to his store — much of it commissioned and grown right here in the area by farmers whose services Palmisano has contracted.

"I went out and got the best I could find," he explains. "Me, I have to have my onions a certain width and height. I have a farmer who grows them for me. I have another guy, he grows green beans just for me, just the way I want them."

The same is true of Palmisano's delectable strawberries ("They're gorgeous right now!"), blueberries, red and black raspberries, sugar snap peas, corn — all grown locally. In addition he imports other products from only the finest producers in the land, he says.

"Our corn isn't ready around here yet. So every day now we have fresh corn shipped in from Georgia," he explains.

## Persnickety Palmisano

Cleveland native Palmisano, who implies he's been around the fruit and vegetable business since he was knee-high to a corn stalk, admits he's persnickety about what he offers his customers. "I wouldn't put out anything here that I wouldn't take home and put on my table," he insists.

"I'll have people come in here and say, 'Bob, you don't have any honeydew today. Where's the honeydew?' You know what I tell them? I tell them I couldn't find any worth putting out. So they just have to wait until I do. I'm very particular."

The same is true of the other items Palmisano offers — "only the best" lunch meats and "imported from New York" cheeses in the deli; baked goods from two popular local bakeries as well as freshly prepared Amish pies, angelfood cakes (in a half dozen or more varieties), cookies, cakes and breads; even a lunchtime menu offering of overstuffed sandwiches, a lavish salad bar and soon-to-be-added frozen custard.

## Mama Mia!

But top quality goods and outstanding service aren't the only things you get when you go marketing at the Newtown Farm Market. If you're lucky, you'll get Bob Palmisano — and, Mama Mia, that's quite a package!

You'll get a fruit and vegetable whiz who'll tell you how to choose your products, what to look for, how to shop — "Even if they don't shop here," he says. "I tell them what to look for in other stores. I love people. I like being helpful."

You'll also get a fun-loving and friendly proprietor reminiscent of the big-hearted Italian mama who's happiest when her family and guests are eating. "People ask me what's good here. I say, 'Go ahead.

Help yourself. Taste some of those strawberries. I don't mind that. Try the cantaloupe. This is the kind of place if you want to know what something tastes like, you just grab a sample."

While he's feeding you, don't be surprised if Palmisano talks to you about his wife's wonderful homemade spaghetti or her original "bean bake" or whatever he's had for dinner the night before with his wife Judy (who handles his book work) and his three young sons (who all have little odd jobs at the Market). If it sounds good to you, he'll even offer to bring in the recipe.

A well-read, health-conscious family man, Palmisano may even come up to you while you're looking over the broccoli and offer some tips on how to prepare it. "If you cook it too long, you know, it takes the vitamins out," he offers.

Or he may suggest you start using more garlic or olive oil. ("They're both good for you, you know.") His friendly advice has been so popular, in fact, that the proprietor plans free summer classes in choosing and preparing fresh fruits and vegetables, along with other helpful and healthful food tips.

So how does Palmisano, this rare and intriguing blend of H. Ross Perot and Mama Leone, manage to keep his business running like a well-oiled machine, especially in today's economy? What's the secret to the kind of success that allows him to plan for even further expansion?

Like his recipes and free advice, there is no big secret.

"I just love people," he says. "This is a tough business. I sometimes put in 100 hours a week. But it's a people business. That's why I love it!"

**Newtown Farm Market (561-2004) is located at 3950 Roundbottom Road, one and a half miles northeast of Newtown off Route 32.**