



PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF TONY'S ICE CREAM

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Founder Carmine Coletta never let a child leave his ice-cream wagon without a delectable scoop.

Tradition Lives On at Tony's

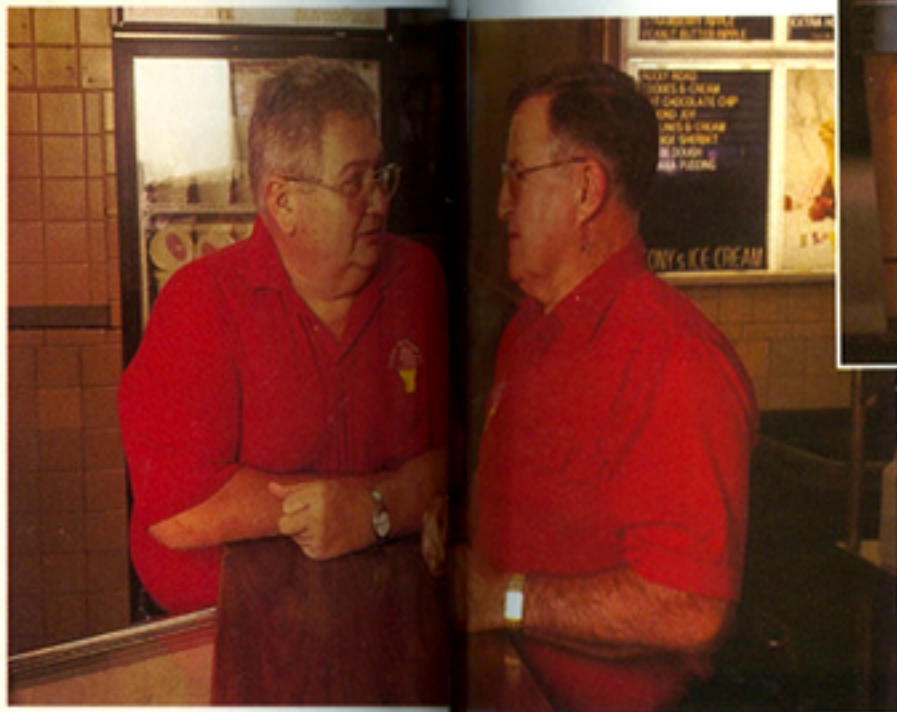
The Coletta family has been serving Gastonia's favorite ice cream for more than 80 years.

It's 4 o'clock on a Friday afternoon, and loyal customers line up for softball-size scoops of ice cream at Tony's. Wearing a red T-shirt splotted with rivulets of the creamy concoction, Louis Coletta slips into a red vinyl booth and opens a family scrapbook to a photograph of his grandfather. In the picture, Carmine "Papa" Coletta, an Italian who immigrated to the U.S. via Scotland in 1911, is dishing out ice cream from a horse-drawn buggy.

"Papa knew everybody," says Louis, 59, who co-owns Tony's Ice

Cream Co. with his younger brother Robert. "People would come out and buy ice cream in [their own] bowls. He was a big talker, but the horse would only stay at one house for so long before it would move on up to the next house. Daddy always told me the horse knew the

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Above: Heart-to-heart conversation comes easily while enjoying Tony's sweet delights. Here, Lauren and Tim Watwood share a moment at Tony's.



The brothers admit they never tire of eating ice cream. Robert Coletta (left) loves to mix chocolate and butter pecan, while Louis prefers good old-fashioned vanilla.

“secret,” the Coletta brothers insist, is simple: fresh milk, *real* ingredients, and taking the time to do it right. “It’s made in small batches,” says Robert, 54. “We fluff it to give it that creamy taste.”

These days, Louis’s daughter Melinda, a Charlotte banker, helps out part-time. Her younger brother, Tony, will likely run the business after college. “We’re waiting on people my dad waited on,” Louis says. “As long as we do a good job, I feel like Tony’s will be waiting on their children.” *Nancy Bearden Henderson*

route as well as Grandpa did.”

Times were hard then, and money scarce. Papa’s customers often traded an egg or an Octagon soap coupon for a scoop of vanilla or chocolate. And the ice-cream vendor never, ever let a child leave his wagon empty-handed.

Papa’s mobile business took root in the early 1920s as Sunrose Ice Cream Co. In 1947, several years after Papa’s death, his son Tony, daughter Mary, and Mary’s husband, Tony Janetta, moved to the yellow-brick landmark in downtown Gastonia, added sandwiches

Louis recalls. “We are ever grateful for their continued support.”

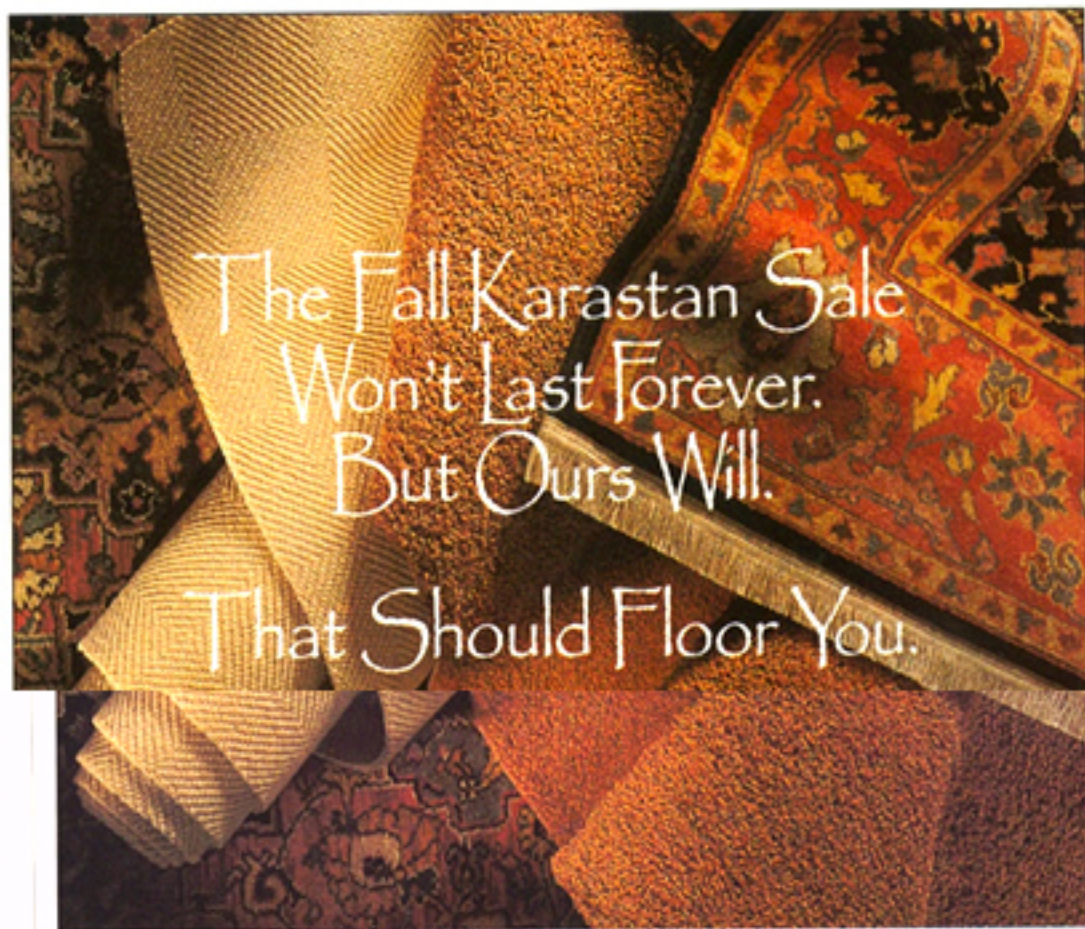
Despite the family’s generosity—or perhaps because of it—the business survived sugar rationing during World War II, the ups and downs of the local textile economy, and the advent of franchised ice-cream parlors.

Papa’s wagon no longer roams the streets of Gastonia, the hand-churning process is now automated, and spumoni and tutti-frutti have given way to cherry cheesecake and mint chocolate chip.

Not much else has changed, though, not even the no-frills decor. The eatery still draws long lines of lunchtime regulars, families on their way home from church, and Little Leaguers who know that, win or lose, there will always be Tony’s after the game.

Here, you get what you pay for—and then some. On Sundays, the restaurant’s longtime employees whip up about 2,000 milk shakes, all topped with an extra mound of ice cream. It takes two hands to manage a towering, single-scoop cone. “If we started putting one little round scoop of ice cream on a cone, we’d be just like everybody else,” Louis says with a grin. And loyal patrons claim it’s the best they’ve ever eaten.

So what makes it so good? The



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HERE'S THE SCOOP

Tony's Ice Cream Co.: 604 East Franklin Avenue, Gastonia; (704) 867-7085. Open 7 a.m.-10 p.m. daily. Prices range from \$1.50 for a heaping cone to \$4 for a half-gallon. A gravy biscuit or chili dog costs \$1.25. Tony's is included on Gaston County's Magnolia Tour. For more information on the tour, call 1-800-849-9994.