

CATANIA OILS SEES BIG GROWTH IN AYER

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AYER -- Giuseppe Basile would be proud.

More than 100 years ago, the non-English-speaking Sicilian immigrant bottled cans of olive and vegetable oil by hand and sold them door-to-door in Lynn.

His two original tanks, small enough to be carted to his store, keeps watch over a forest of 30,000 and 35,000 tanks. Each can hold the contents of a railroad tanker car.

Today, his great-grandchildren own and run Catania Oils, a multi-million dollar global business. The family company relocated to Ayer from Somerville when they began to run out of space, said Executive Vice President Stephen Basile.



In May, Catania Oils received a \$229,170 Workforce Development Grant to train 56 workers and create 10 additional jobs by 2019. It was the largest of the 111 grants made under the program in 2017.

The grant from the Executive Office of Labor and Workforce Development is intended to help businesses in Massachusetts thrive and expand, said Jim Desrosiers, owner of GROWTHco, a training and development firm in Groton.

The tanker cars, parked on enclosed railroad tracks, provide a clue about why the company chose Ayer. Whenever a rail car was late and someone asked where it was, the answer was often "It's in Ayer," Basile said.

Over the decades, Catania has grown and prospered, changing business tactics and locations.

At one point, the packaging company expanded into selling many products, but went back to its roots when that was the best way to grow, Basile said. Now, the company has more than 140 employees. Catania has 250,000 square feet in use in Ayer for warehousing and packaging, mostly cooking oils. The packaging lines operate around the clock five days a week. Trucks haul product where it is needed, but usually within a day's trip.

The fourth-generation family business needs to make some changes to get to the next step, Desrosiers said. The state grant is going help.

Catania sees more teamwork as an important part of getting there. "Overall, their goal is to get people to be more entrepreneurial," Desrosiers said.

Catania needs to transition from a family business where people take better positions because of the time they've spent in the company to a business where leaders have the skills they need to be effective, he said.

The business has kept up with technology since arriving in Ayer in 1994. The company is using more computer control for things from logistics and quality assurance.

Oil from rail tanker cars is pumped directly into the plant up to storage tanks. Enclosing the tracks makes the work easier in bad weather.

An employee was on top of a car, using something sounded just like a pneumatic air tool at a garage.

When Basile and his brother Joe, now president of the company, were in high school, they did that job with muscle power, he said. The brothers worked at the business in Somerville, learning it from the ground up with their grandfather.

The company has grown through street smarts, but the family knew that changes were needed to continue to succeed, Desrosiers said.

"Catania wanted to catch up the people in the roles they already had," the consultant said.

As Basile walked through the plant, he greeted employees by name and asked after their families. The storage tanks were not just numbered. Each was named after someone in the family or business.

Francesca, a big, red tank containing non-GMO verified canola oil, is named for his daughter. When a child is born, another tradition calls for blessing the baby with olive oil.

"You don't want to lose your strength, which is the family aspect, having people care," Desrosiers said. "It's very important to them that they don't lose that value as family."

The training is designed to keep that core value and to ensure that the employees are open to the changes. The events and classes will encourage growth as both an employee and as a person, the trainer said.

Most everyone, except those at work back in the plant, went to Gillette Stadium, for the training kick off. Teamwork, which Catania wants to increase, is what makes the Kraft family and the New England Patriots so high performing, Desrosiers said. "It's not about one individual."

Until the start of summer, Desrosiers held classes for management personnel. During four-hour sessions, they worked on teamwork and leadership skills.

Leaders cannot lead the organization into the future and be "down in the weeds" performing tasks that should be delegated to others, Desrosiers said.

"That's a big, big transition for them," he said.

In the fall, GROWTHco, a registered training provider for the grant program, will start working with employees to improve processes.

The grant requires a match from the company. That will be covered by salary payments for the time spent in training and other for other expenses.

In the meantime, Guiseppe's tanks and his son's fedora keep watch over those tanks named for family members. Their progeny march to the future, now armed with new knowledge to keep the oil flowing and to continue to thrive in Massachusetts.

And, that fedora?

The second-generation owner popped it over an emergency light when the Ayer plant opened, telling the family he was hanging his hat in his new home, Basile said. The fire marshal said it had to move, so now it hangs on first Catania tanks.

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