

**O**n the August day I meet Cori Bonina in her commissary, things are fairly quiet. That's a rare occurrence here at Cori's Kitchen. The day before, the kitchen was running on double-shift and the week before staff were going crazy prepping apple pies, lasagnas and more. On a typical day, 10 staffers in hairnets and white coats toil over cutting boards, caramelize onions in the tilt skillet, pull chickens out of ovens, feed 1,200 pounds of oranges through two industrial-size juicers and stir one of two huge soup cauldrons, each holding up to 200 quarts of broth.

Each week they also turn more than 100 cows into roast beef, cook and slice 60 kilograms of turkey for pies or sandwiches, and turn 2,000 apples a day into pies. The

micromanage everything," she says. "But every recipe is run past me and I suggest things."

**Great gourmet, great ideas** It's her attention to detail that Bonina, 48, is known for. Friends and competitors in the grocery industry describe Bonina as a fast adapter of new ideas and quick to put her own stamp on things. When she took over as general manager of Stong's Market, in 1997 (she's now the president), Bonina quickly placed her own management team around her, put the store through a \$2.5-million, three-year renovation and dove into online shopping. She also introduced a handful of savvy customer service initiatives, adding free valet parking and an in-store wellness centre staffed by a nutritionist. As a foodie, she's created her own line of products under the Cori's Kitchen brand and will soon publish a book full of her own recipes and anecdotes. No wonder the tag line for Cori's Kitchen is "a passion for food."

Bonina's track record more than qualifies her for her new role as chair of the Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers. Under her rule, Stong's has cleaned up in virtually every category of the CFG awards, including a gold in the medium-size grocer category in 2005; gold in the merchandiser award medium-surface category; and platinum for the Canadian Master Merchandiser Award. She's also been bestowed the CFG's Hall of Fame award, presented annually

# Cooking with Cori

With a new kitchen and prepared food brand, Cori Bonina is taking her grocery business to new heights **BY EVE LAZARUS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY PERRY ZAVITZ**

commissary produces prepared meals from 150 recipes—everything from shepherd's pie and hummus to a fresh salsa that's to die for.

Bonina's biggest client for these tasty items is her own grocery store, Stong's Market. Stong's has been a fixture in Vancouver's west end since the Great Depression. A year ago she also began shipping to four non-competing independent grocery stores in Metro Vancouver. And last January she snagged United Airlines. Cori's Kitchen now supplies the air carrier's planes with ham-and-cheese sandwiches, wraps, cheese trays and other lunch items.

Whether they're heading to New York or someplace more far-flung, United's passengers probably don't realize that a small independent grocer from Vancouver is catering their high-flying food experience. Bonina personally tests every item that comes out of her kitchen to make sure it lives up to her standards. "I try not to

to the retailer who has shown a high level of excellence year after year. Bonina also won the Ernst & Young Entrepreneur of the Year Award, and *Vancouver Courier* readers have named Stong's their favourite grocery store for 10 consecutive years.

"You don't survive in that tough Vancouver market unless you are innovative," says John Scott, CFG's president. "She's an amazing sponge. If she sees an idea she's not afraid to grab it and talk to somebody to find out more; and she has that humble way about her."

Albert Lum, director of merchandising and sales for Buy Low Foods, has supplied Stong's with everything from produce to frozen foods for more than 14 years. "Cori's always looking for that edge to beat out competitors whether it's products or services." He points to the valet parking as an example. "I don't think there is any valet service for cars in the grocery industry. That's innovative.



'If customers can't find parking at the store, we'll park your car for you.' That's leading edge."

Bonina also has a flair for spotting opportunities early on. Francois Bouchard, owner of the Country Grocer in Ottawa, who's worked with Bonina through CFGI, notes, "Some of us do a little prepared food and we kind of dabble in it. She decides she's going to go the whole way and actually built a full-sized kitchen with all the food safety implementation and everything to develop her own line of product. It's not an easy thing. It's a totally different business than grocery."

The prepared-food commissary, a 20-minute drive from her supermarket, opened 18 months ago. It encompasses 5,000 square feet in an industrial park in Burnaby. About half the space is devoted to the kitchen and the rest to warehousing for the store, administration and packaging. Ken Nilsson, the commissary's general manager, says the goal is to run the kitchen 24/7 and increase the number of products supplied to other grocers.

Rick Chapelsky, owner of a Buy Low store in Burnaby, is already a customer. He's purchased a variety of salads, hummus and apple pies from Cori's Kitchen and couldn't be more pleased. "There's a market for a high-rent product along these lines."

**10 things I love about Stong's** Before heading to the commissary, I'd met up with Bonina at her store on Dunbar Street in Vancouver. As we stroll through the aisles, she greets several shoppers by name. Bonina frequently sends products home with these customers, to try out and critique. If someone says the potatoes in the chicken pot pie are too chewy or the shepherd's pie is too watery, it goes back to the kitchen for discussion, trial and experimentation. The challenge, she says, is to always stay both tasty and cost effective.

The profile of a typical Stong's customer has changed over the decades. Once it was mostly seniors; today young mothers push children in shopping carts and more young, professional couples are dropping in.

What hasn't changed is the fanatical devotion shoppers seem to have for the 10,000-square-foot store that's packed with upwards of 30,000 items. A quick perusal on Yelp.com, the influential consumer ratings website, says it all: one customer recently listed off her "10 things I love about Stong's"; another wrote: "[Stong's] stocks everything from the U.K. that we enjoy and can't get elsewhere. Where else can you get mulled wine sachets at Xmas? And they deliver exactly to the minute you've arranged."

Opened in 1931, Stong's is one of the oldest grocery stores in Vancouver and likely one of the few spanning five



Stong's Market in Vancouver: For 10 years readers of one of the local newspapers have voted it their favourite grocery store



generations. There's a mural outside the front of the store that has a picture of a handsome, young Carson Stong, the store's founder, in 1910 with his new cash register. He and his brother opened their first store in Toronto in the 1890s. Later, after crossing the continent, they set up shop in Seattle. In 1931 Carson headed north to start his own store in Vancouver. His namesake, Bonina's 17-year-old son Carson, works in the kitchen during his summer holidays.

Bonina, who describes herself as shy, worked at Stong's through school and university, but never fathomed entering the family business. Back then grocery was a man's world. "When I was growing up my grandfather just assumed that my brothers would take over. That was just the way it was." But when the two boys decided to pursue



A passion for food: Cori's Kitchen prepares about 150 different meals for her own store, other retailers, and even United Airlines

## Taking over at CFIG

Cori Bonina will be the first woman chair of the Canadian Federation of Independent Grocers in its 48-year history. And she's looking forward to giving back to an industry that she says has helped her so much. When Bonina becomes chair at the end of this month she'll provide leadership to around 4,000 independent grocers, and meet with politicians and key industry leaders. "I have a lot of trust in Cori's business acumen," says John Scott, CFIG's president. Adds Francois Bouchard, owner of the Country Grocer in Ottawa and the outgoing chair: "She embodies everything we stand for as independents."

other careers, Bonina suddenly found herself in line to take over. "I was absolutely terrified. I remember saying, 'I can't do this on my own.'" But her determination paid off.

At one time Stong's was a five-store chain with stores in Vancouver and on the North Shore. Then, in the early '90s, competition went from tough to brutal. Bonina's father, Bill Rossum, sold all but the Dunbar Street store. "I still think that was the best thing that ever happened," says Bonina. "We were losing customers to the big-box stores and we decided we can't compete on price." Instead, Stong's switched its focus to service, selection and quality. Specifically, it started to bring in more speciality foods.

The timing was ideal. Woodward's, the majestic department store chain that ruled western Canadian retail for more than a century, had just gone bankrupt. With its superb specialty foods section suddenly gone, customers started asking Stong's for more unique items. "We suddenly realized this is what people want," Bonina recalls.

Of course, competition still remains fierce. In the last two years, seven grocery stores have opened within six kilometres of Stong's. But innovations such as online shopping and sourcing unusual products have helped Stong's carve out a powerful niche. Recently, when a customer wanted angelica, a green candied herb used in traditional fruitcakes, Bonina found it from a supplier in Summerland, B.C., and delivered it to her.

Likewise, Stong's Express, the online shopping business,

grew out of a phone-in, fax-in service shopping service that started in the early 1990s. "At the time, I took the orders, I did the shopping and I delivered them," Bonina says. She still remembers driving her red Ford Escort to make the first delivery of tea, biscuits and fruit to a "sweet, little old lady. I ended up having tea with her and put her groceries away and made no money on the sale." Today, the online business represents only about 6% of sales. But with 250 to 300 orders every week and an average basket size that's three to four times what it is in the store, Stong's has a loyal following as far away as Richmond, Port Moody and Bowen Island.

Looking ahead, Bonina is not opposed to expanding Stong's again. She bought an older building on Vancouver's west side a couple of years ago. Then the recession hit, and the timing just wasn't right. Still, if she does expand, it'll be with a smaller footprint. Bonina envisions shops in the 5,000-square-foot range selling specialty items, cooking utensils and offering cooking classes. Naturally, she'd also sell lots of gourmet home-meal replacements. Straight from Cori's Kitchen, of course. **CG**