



# we are family

The Bernardi family proudly operate five supermarkets in the Central West and Riverina, employing more than 500 people.

**It would never have happened** if patriarch Tony Bernardi hadn't left his homeland of Italy 58 years ago with nothing more than youthful optimism and a carefully folded £20 note in his pocket. He was only 15 and he was starting a new life in faraway Australia. This is his story.

Tony and his twin brother, Mario, were born at home in northern Italy in the winter of 1938. It wasn't a good time to begin life in Europe, which was about to be plunged into its darkest hours.

The Bernardi family was in the thick of the action as Mussolini's black-shirted bullies demanded produce for the war effort.

Cows were milked four times a day to show poor production when the authorities arrived. Wheat from their one-acre crop was hidden behind a false wall in the house.

Tony's mother, Giovanna, baked the forbidden white bread at night time, ignoring the air-raid sirens that drove the rest of the family to their underground shelter.

When Germany occupied the country in 1943, conditions worsened. Young men were rounded up for slave labour in Germany or drafted into the army.

Neighbours hid their sons in the Bernardi hayloft, where they survived searches by bayonet-wielding soldiers. Partisans were executed when they were caught, some hanged from trees in an avenue of a nearby town.

When it was all over, the country lay in ruins. Tony's father, Giuseppe, still worked his few acres with little more than his bare hands, much as his countrymen had done for centuries.

When the twins hit age 10 they were placed in a seminary in Padua, to continue their education and train for the priesthood. It was a gross miscalculation of their characters – two more unsuitable candidates for the priesthood would have been hard to find!

Mario stayed for two years. Tony lasted another year before going home to help on the farm.

## Leaving Italy for a new life

When older brother Angelo reneged on a plan to help his uncle on a small farm in Forbes on the other side of the world, 15-year-old Tony stepped in.

"When we think of people sailing on great adventures we think of last-minute embraces, bands playing and coloured streamers, but it wasn't like that when Tony left home," wife Helen says.

Clutching an old suitcase with a few handmade clothes, Tony boarded the *Oceania* and found himself bunking down with 13 youths in the bowels of the ship, close to the engines.

Tucked securely in his pocket was the £20 note given to him by his father and the third-class ticket paid by his uncle in Australia. After some initial seasickness, he enjoyed his 30 days at sea. It would be a long time before he enjoyed anything else.

Homesickness, loneliness and a difficult and an uncompromising uncle completely overwhelmed him. He cried over his mother's letters, rereading them until they disintegrated. He resolved to repay his uncle for his fare and earn enough money to return home.

To achieve this he leased a few acres with another young immigrant and established a market garden. The pair lived in two unlined rooms on the end of their corrugated iron shed. Tony liked to bargain with the local retailers for the best price for their produce.

Meantime, he enrolled in a correspondence English course for new Australians, and in 1959 received his Australian citizenship at a ceremony in the Town Hall.

Floods that wiped out their summer crop twice within a month in 1960 were the final straw. After waking up with water under their beds, they were floated across the flooded creek on 44 gallon drums. Tony never went back.

Adapt. Improvise. Overcome! Time for Plan B.

## A new direction

Tony Bernardi took local vendor Stan Shirvington's advice to put a canopy on his small Ford truck and try his luck selling fruit and vegetables in outlying townships like Trundle, Tullamore and Condobolin.

New Australians were not readily accepted at the time, but he gradually built up a reputation for being reliable and punctual. Commencing work at 2.30 each morning and working by the light he had installed under his canopy, Tony filled orders left in mailboxes along the roadways.

Sleeping in the cabin of his truck became the norm.

"Over the next eight years that little business paid for our first house," Helen says. "We then bought a new Bedford truck and purchased an electrical goods shop in Lachlan Street (now the office of Highland Design)."

By 1969 the ambitious Italian wasn't holding back. Fifteen years after arriving in Forbes with close to nothing, he had worked long and hard to save enough for a trip home to his beloved family.

With Helen and two young kids in tow, this was the journey he had played out in his head a thousand times. In those days overseas travel was a costly exercise and Tony knew this might be the last time he would ever see his parents. >

**FACING PAGE:** The Bernardi Group is proudly owned and operated by Joseph, Tony, David and Peter Bernardi.



## 7 things you might not know about Tony

- 1 Tony stoically accepted the hardships of being a "new Australian" unable to speak English. With no assistance he struggled to gain a foothold in a new country. He left a hard life to try to forge a better one, and was ready to do anything in order to achieve it.
- 2 Tony and Helen met in 1959 through Tony leasing 20 acres of the family farm Helen grew up on. Their first meal together 54 years ago was in his unlined corrugated iron kitchen on that very same block.
- 3 Many people would be surprised to know that Tony does not write in English.
- 4 Tony rises religiously at 6am each day and walks three kilometres to work. You can set your clock by his daily arrival at 7am. Work is finished by lunchtime.
- 5 Although philosophically on the same page, Tony and Helen do not have any shared hobbies.
- 6 Family life is uppermost to this devoted family man with 17 grandchildren. Nine of them will carry on the great Bernardi name, but all will play a pivotal role in the enduring love story between Tony and Helen, and Tony and his adopted country.
- 7 The £20 note that Tony arrived in Australia with nearly six decades ago was returned intact to his father. Tony felt that he may have needed it more.





### *Family business*

Meanwhile, back in Forbes, there was much to be done. On a block of land on the corner of Lachlan Street and Brownes Lane, the Bernardis established a drive-in fruit market employing two people: Tony and Helen.

Their first store was basic and simply sold fruit and vegetables, bread and milk and a handful of other grocery items.

Who could have imagined it would be the humble start to a small empire?

Overcoming difficulties with language, Tony quickly learnt the grocery business, and became an aggressive “investment buyer”, filling ever-expanding warehouse space with bargain-price stock.

It proved to be a very successful policy and soon they were competing with the established Woolworths store.

By 1972 business was flourishing and the premises expanded to become a fully fledged supermarket. More property was acquired as trade increased.

In 1983 the Bernardi supermarket was among the first in the state to install laser scanning. Soon after, a butchery and liquor licence were added. Further stores were established in Blayney, West Wyalong and Bathurst with the redeveloped Forbes store serving as company headquarters.

### *A working family*

While Tony’s courage, determination and leadership paved the way, Helen admits it has been one big family affair.

From a young age, the Bernardi children learnt how to work and put in long hours. They all helped out after school, on weekends and during school holidays.

The three boys all grew up in the family business and are all actively involved today, while Louise chose a different career but still maintains close family ties.

David is regarded as one of the most professional buyers in the business. Discount Dave’s was his initiative in 1994. It was a great success and there are now similar stores throughout the Central West to complement the supermarket chain.

“Peter is amazing with IT and all our retail software programs,” Helen says. “He is also the peacemaker and problem solver when staff members need help with their troubles.

“Joseph is the entrepreneur always looking for a better way to do things while seeking new opportunities.”



Helen is justifiably proud of her sons, and their wives Louise, Nicole, and Abi – and not just because they all work so well together.

“We put aside our differences to work for the common good. We respect each other for the different elements each brings to the business,” she says.

Tony agrees, and says none of it would have been possible without their wonderful staff, whose loyalty and service give a personal identity to their business.

“Through our business we have come to know countless wonderful people – most of them ordinary and hard working – just doing their best for their families.”

Tony believes the only way to succeed is with hard work, one day at a time. Over the years his customers have been helped by three generations of the Bernardi family.

The Bernardis know the vital key to success: families who work together can move mountains.

“At the end of the day we see our greatest success in being a close and loving family,” Helen says with a warm smile. “A family that supports each other through good times and bad and a family that focuses on the common good.” **CWL**

**UPDATE:** *The family are thrilled to be opening a new Bernardi’s supermarket in Wagga Wagga at the end of October, expanding their current Central West footprint into the Riverina.*

*Words and images: Shot by Jake • Edition 5, Winter 2014*

**ABOVE:** Tony and Helen have been a formidable team since they met in 1959; David Bernardi is passionate about sourcing direct deals that provide greater savings for their customers