



Photo by Kevin Argue

## Lifestyle Niagara: Jordan personifies the good times: Opportunity 'dumped' on Len Pennachetti and Helen Young

BY LYNN OGRYZLO

*He was but a boy when his best friend moved to Jordan. This child biked out to that tiny village to play with his chum, not realizing he was pedaling to his destiny. Today, he recognizes that, long ago, he connected with this village in a permanent sense. It would be here that he, and the girl of his future, would establish a first destination for visitors to Niagara. The boy was Leonard Pennachetti, who would marry Helen Young, and together create a world-renowned tourist attraction in a place which once was only a small dot on the roadmap of Old Highway Eight.*

It was the spring of 2002. *Gourmet Magazine* raved about their newest "discovery".

The "discovery" by this internationally respected high-life magazine was in Niagara. It was, as described, "the beautiful little inland village of Jordan".

Jordan remains "little" in terms of geographic confines, yet gargantuan in impact on the Region of Niagara and its hospitality industry.

The embryo of transformation began in 1972.

An 18-year-old named Leonard Pennachetti was studying the geography of his native Niagara Peninsula in high school when he became aware of the unique micro-climate created by the interaction of Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment.

Len knew his family history, dated to the early 1920s, when his grandfather, Giuseppe, emigrated from his hometown of Fermo, in central Italy, to work as a mason on Niagara's Welland Canal. Years later, when Giuseppe retired from the concrete busi-

ness he and his sons built, the old man succumbed to a passion coursing through his blood from the time he was a youth in Italy – vineyards.

On lands of modest quality and with native *labrusca* grape varieties (the crop of that day) Giuseppe would prune and tie his hobby vineyard with son John and grandson Leonard. The wines, like the vines, were wanting in quality, and the family knew improvement was possible. Young Leonard, as the family story goes, knew that moderate lake breezes hinder severe winter cold, especially along the slopes of the Niagara Escarpment.

Len's father, John T. Pennachetti, at the time heading the family's concrete manufacturing business, watched his son's interest in growing grape vines and decided that the family would invest in superior vineyards. He took Len on an aerial scouting of the escarpment bench, recognizing that the historic Cave Spring Farm, due to its hillside location, heavy clay soils and proxim-

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Len and Helen's goal remains providing a diverse and eclectic mid- to high-end experience for visitors to this "little inland village". Unlike the historic old town of Niagara-on-the-Lake, this community can be handled, says Len, who feels "I'm pretty lucky to be able to control what moves into Jordan Village."

"I'd rather have an empty store front than compromise on the quality of the village."

Helen likes to think of their evolving community as setting a standard of neighbourhood involvement. She and Len entrusted the look of the streetscape to Darren Schmahl, owner of Copper Leaf Garden Store. Darren's enterprise is cited as one of the top 10 such shops in Canada by *Gardening Life Magazine*, an accolade reflected in the village's profusion of flowers, shade trees and well-kept grounds which create a welcoming pedestrian atmosphere satisfying Helen's belief that "beauty sells tourism".

Len and Helen, by their description, work similarly to a builder and designer. Len describes himself as "the bricks and mortar guy while Helen's eye for seeing more than what's in front of us has inspired some of our most successful business decisions".

Neither wanted to be in the food business so no one, they recall, was more surprised than they to find themselves with a second restaurant. During the building of the Village of Jordan, Len says he found he had achieved a great management team. That team had to move somewhere. "If we weren't building something," he explains, "what the hell were we going to do with ourselves?" They looked for answers in new opportunities. One partner owned property in Port Dalhousie, a prospect they hadn't considered.

The dockside restaurant and lounge Twelve, in the former Albert's, represents Len and Helen's first venture out of Jordan, but it is not unconnected to their original venture.

It has been great, says Helen, to offer their clientele a more informal, and less expensive, dining alternative. Once inn guests have purchased Cave Springs wine, dined in On The Twenty, joined the crowds at the highly popular Zooma

Zooma, selected collectibles at the antiques and retail shops, they're encouraged to take a 15-minute drive to another heritage landmark, Twelve in the picturesque waterfront town of Port Dalhousie, where the Pennachettis, not surprisingly, are in the vanguard of another community renaissance.

"If I can borrow the money and service the debt, I'm happy," says Len, who contends that, without risk, one cannot be safe and successful in business. "You don't know if something's going to work, until the money is sunk."

Jordan Village revitalization is a family affair. Len's brother, Tom, is an integral part of the equation as is their mother, Dorothy. "My family is pretty patient," confides Len. "Every time we make a nickel, we put it back into the business for reinvestment."

Jordan Village renewal inspires other retail and tourism development.

Conservation tourism walked onto the scene with the Twenty Valley Trail and the surrounding watershed area. The trail runs from the Bailey Bridge on the north-west corner behind Jordan Village, south along Twenty Mile Creek to Ball's Falls. Along the way, you'll find hiking trails with natural water falls, creeks and ponds, as well as forests. A full-service campground (with clubhouse, swimming pool, rental canoes and children's play area) accommodating the most spartan of tenters to the most lavish of RVers, lies in the valley, a five-minute hike uphill to the village proper, where an authentic Mennonite village,

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**— Leonard Pennachetti**

museum and art gallery beckon visitors.

Nature and the novelties of luxury abide in and about this revitalized industrial strip in the heart of Jordan, now attracting visitors from all over the world. Jordan Village, a magazine writer might enthuse, is among the gourmet of redevelopments. **L**

— Lynn Ogryzlo is a food, wine and travel writer and originator of the Niagara Culinary Trail

ity to Lake Ontario, was the site they wanted. Len knew the area well; a boyhood chum, whom he often visited, had lived here.

This was the general locale of Jordan Wines (1921 to 1986). At the peak of its success, the winery occupied both sides of the village's narrow streets with warehouses and other buildings. After its purchase in 1970, Jordan Wines was joined by various businesses, giving the community an industrial complexion belying its heritage.

But, commerce subsequently moved on to larger centres and industrial properties were abandoned, leaving an imprint of neglect on this history-steeped community.

The buildings, however, remained.

The south-end unit of the main industrial building was leased to a vineyard owner who wanted to try his hand at establishing a new winery. He was a visionary, that once 18-year-old who had witnessed his future from an airplane.

Back then, Len recalls, "the street was a dump". Len Pennachetti, then a St. Catharines property developer and vineyard owner, with his wife, Helen Young, inspired and hand-guided Jordan's transformation into that beautiful quaint village that many name-brand magazines, including *Toronto Life*, have extolled for its artisan shops, Cave Spring Cellars Winery, On the Twenty Restaurant, Inn On The Twenty and other attractions.

In the past year, Helen has ventured further, spearheading Twelve, a canal-front restaurant in Port Dalhousie, catering to less formal inclinations than Twenty tastes, but with the same ambiance of elegance and signature menus.

In the beginning at Jordan, Len viewed what others considered a street to nowhere as an interim move, a place to tide him over until a permanent winery could be built on the Cave Spring Vineyard (CSV) site in Beamsville.

He leased the space in 1987 and produced the first 3,000 cases of wine. Cave Spring Cellars quickly established itself as a fine-wine maker, which, in a few years, outgrew production facilities.

Living Len's dream of establishing a new winery on the CSV site, Helen saw potential in the old Jordan Wines building.

She recalls that it was not so much a major decision as it was a logical step to purchase the obsolete building. All elements necessary to expand the winery beckoned from the rubble of age and abandonment. The building once was a winery with a stunning view of the spectacular Twenty Valley; it contained the perfect cellar and, equally important, she and Len had planted roots in the village.

In 1990, the Pennachettis bought the old Jordan Winery building on the west side of the main street, took a unit within the building and expanded it, leaving established businesses to continue.

The purchase of the old building was not only a risk, but a departure from Len's Kodak-perfect vision of a "countryside winery surrounded with lush, rolling vineyards".

It was Len's passion for tending these vines that inspired him to take the next step into wine-making. A grape grower at heart, by his description, Len nonetheless expanded into property management. He made the area less industrial and more pedestrian-friendly with what he describes as a "Hollywood remake" on building

facades. Len convinced an antiques merchant to expand into a market of dealers and recruited other retailers offering goods and services enticing his wine customers.

It is called multi-choice marketing and it caught on quickly.

Wines from Cave Spring Cellars were pouring a popular stream in the Niagara wine scene. As the customer base grew and winery traffic increased from and to Toronto and environs, so did the potential for related food sales. No local restaurants catered to wine connoisseurs.

When the largest unit of the old building became vacant, Len and Helen searched for a restaurateur to fill the void. But, the space was unpalatable, with grease the primary wall treatment. Helen, though, could see the building's potential in original pillars, 15-foot-high ceilings and a spectacular view of Twenty Valley. This, she forecast, would be an exquisite restaurant.

Helen's vision wore blinders in many other minds. Successful restaurateurs from Toronto and environs investigated her site: "They all walked away," she remembers, telling her it was, after all, a filthy site in the middle of nowhere, right across from existing industry.

So, the Pennachettis ventured into the restaurant business, with an investment in heavy-duty cleaning supplies. On The Twenty Restaurant debuted in the spring of 1993. It was like magic, as those of us who witnessed the village's transformation might recall. The restaurant opened, garnering rave reviews; wine sales skyrocketed; and hi-end retailers lined up.

"Nothing succeeds like success," says Len with a wry smile.

But, their challenges were as appetizers.

The Pennachetti side of the street blazed beauty with the Hollywood remake and blooming landscapes, a prettified smile across the street from the frown of industrial businesses, an unkempt string of buildings with constant truck traffic that annoyed customers leisurely sipping fine wine on the patio. Len approached his partners and purchased the largest warehouse in the neighbourhood.

That space was renovated into an elegant home-away-from-home and, in the spring of 1996, Inn On The Twenty opened with nine rooms. Adjacent buildings were purchased, retail space expanded and, in the spring of 2003, Spa on the Twenty opened. Today, the inn contains 29 rooms you wish were yours.

In the most current shuffle, the Cave Spring Cellars winery retail store has been relocated next to the restaurant. The cellars beneath the store have been renovated for private tastings around a wine display with nautical and geological maps lining the walls. It is here, over the viticultural maps, that Len loses himself in his own conversation on weather patterns, elevations, heat units and degree days, "still," as he apologizes, "a grape grower at heart".

Property management, now village management, consumes Len's time. Although he laments the loss of lazy summers in the vineyard, he acquiesces to the demands of his reputation as among leaders of Niagara's community redevelopment.

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