

## CHARACTER STUDY | COREY KILGANNON



John Cortese, 91, in Golden Gate Fancy Fruits and Vegetables, which his father opened in 1939.

## A Grocer's Ripe Years

JOHN CORTESE wiped his hands on his white apron and paused over the purchase of a half-dozen zucchinis.

"Go see what the price is," he told the customer in his shop on Flatbush Avenue. "I forgot it. I tell you, I don't know anything anymore."

Then he winked, this 91-year-old grocer who still has his marbles, still opens every morning at 7 a.m. and still runs things himself at Golden Gate Fancy Fruits and Vegetables, on the border of Flatlands and Mill Basin in South Brooklyn.

He has been working there since his father opened the place in 1939.

"When you come in here, it's still 1939," he said. "Older people get flashbacks when they walk in."

The wooden floor is well worn, and old-fashioned scales hang from the tin ceiling, "just in case the power goes out," he said.

A modest inventory of fruit is laid out in shallow boxes lined with foil, along with boxes of macaroni and some other staples. The shelving is propped on melon crates with faded labels.

"Those boxes are older than you are," he deadpanned to a reporter visiting the shop, which resembles a movie set, albeit one filled with personal touches, like prices scrawled on cardboard squares fitted into notches on hand-whittled wooden sticks.

The customer shopping for zucchinis consulted one square — 69 cents a pound — and Mr. Cortese tallied her bill by hand

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## THE PARTICULARS

Name John Cortese

Age 91

Where He's From Prospect Heights, Brooklyn

What He Is Grocer

**Telling Detail** During World War II, Mr. Cortese served with the 551st Field Artillery Battalion, and he landed dramatically on Omaha Beach in June 1944. He fought in the Battle of the Bulge and others throughout Europe.

in a loose-leaf notebook.

"When it gets too complicated, I use the adding machine," he said, ripping the page out for her receipt.

Dozens of framed photographs of old Brooklyn line his walls, along with his handwritten "Poor Grocer" poem, which recounts a weary produce man at heaven's gate and ends with this couplet:

"The gates were opened swiftly and St. Peter touched the bell.

"Come in," he said, "and take a harp — you've had enough of hell."

Actually, Mr. Cortese said, the fruit business was just a front for his real interest: holding court in the once-bustling shop.

"I used to have a staff in here — now it's just me," he said. "People don't cook like they used to. They order out, they use supermarkets. So many of the things we used to sell — wax beans, rhubarb, oyster plants, lima beans — I don't carry this stuff anymore. People are looking for prepared foods."

Mr. Cortese lives nearby, grew up in Prospect Heights, Brooklyn, and began working in the shop as a boy.

"It hasn't changed since then," he said. "Once, I was going to redo the storefront, but my accountant said, 'Why? Then the landlord will expect a new ceiling, new walls, new everything.' And I'm glad I never did, because now it's an antique."

Mr. Cortese took over from his father in 1960 and later bought the building, which has enabled him to stay in business in recent years.

"It doesn't make money anymore — I'm putting money into it," said Mr. Cortese, whose one sojourn away from the shop was to fight in World War II right after graduating from Alexander Hamilton Vocational High School.

In the rear of the shop, he pointed to an old bicycle with a wire basket — "I delivered on that till I was 50" — and to his old potbellied stove with the teakettle on top, and to the walk-in freezer and the slot where the ice man used to put huge, cold blocks every few days.

Out the back door were his garden and his fig trees.

"I give them to my good customers," Mr. Cortese said.

His wife, Anne, died in January. He returned to work soon afterward, he said, because "there's no way I could sit around the house after that."

He visits her grave at Holy Cross Cemetery nearby, he said, noting that Gil Hodges, the great Brooklyn Dodgers first baseman and New York Mets manager, is also buried there.

Transitioning to cheerier topics, he said, "You know, Gil Hodges once came in the shop."

"I was waiting on Mrs. Governale, and I saw him picking out grapefruits," he recalled. "He had huge hands but he was no good at picking grapefruits, so I said, 'Here, let me help.'" Mr. Cortese mentioned that his son, John, was a big Dodgers fan.

"Hodges came back with two game balls from the 1969 World Series," he said.

He began chatting with a customer who told him her parents were from Galway, Ireland. Mr. Cortese began a fine rendition of "Galway Bay," remembering every lyric and hitting every note.

When a Nigerian woman bought a bag of red pepper slices that Mr. Cortese had prepared that morning, he reflected that he had seen waves of European immigrants give way to those from Asian, Caribbean and Middle Eastern countries.

"And I love them all when they come in here," he said.

He has no plans to retire.

"He'll stay there until he physically can't do it anymore," said his daughter Janine Coyne. "He's not going anywhere unless something takes him out."

## N.Y.C. Nature Ruby-Throated Hummingbird

## Jewels on the Wing

HUMMINGBIRDS HAVE an ancient charisma that borders on the mythological. Humble in size, they are endowed with miraculous flying abilities vastly disproportionate to their three-inch wingspans. The birds shimmer like airborne emeralds, and with wings rendered nearly invisible at more than 70 strokes per second, they seem suspended in midair by otherworldly forces. Like fireflies, foxes, bats and toads, they inhabit both the corners of our gardens and our imaginations.

Surrounded by blossoms, hummingbirds can seem preoccupied, and close encounters with people are not uncommon. Humans and birds visiting flowers have different expectations, but at this time of year they occasionally wind up sharing an interspecies moment.

## Loners that socialize only momentarily to pair off and copulate.

Whenever I encounter a hummingbird up close, it is as if I were the first human to experience its magic. They are captivating, fairylike and as fascinating on the wing as they are in legend.

New York City's most commonly seen species, the ruby-throated hummingbird (*Archilochus colubris*), ranges from central Canada to Central America. It is a tiny bird; insect-like and intricate in every detail. It is also asocial. When multiple hummingbirds meet at a flower, arguments and chases result. Indeed, the only time a hummingbird will suffer the presence of another is during the few moments it takes to find a mate and copulate.

It is no surprise that females raise their young alone. While the male returns to arguing and defending territory, his mate weaves an elfin cup from spider's silk, lichens and thistle down, and lays one to three eggs in a nest that



LARRY MASTER

she may reuse if it lasts the winter.

A hummingbird's metabolic demands are so high that it must enter a state of torpor to survive overnight without feeding. It is entirely dependent upon flowers for food, though it is a myth that the birds live on nectar alone, or respond only to red, tubular flowers. While they do sip nectar, hummingbirds are opportunistic insectivores, and are happy to eat invertebrates attracted to flowers of any size, color or shape. They frequently hawk insects midair, and they favor spiders. Watching a hummer delicately extract a spider and its captured prey from the center of a web can be amusing. Though there are records of large, tropical insects feeding on hummingbirds, their main predators locally are other birds, especially blue jays and kestrels. Nighttime presents other hazards, including squirrels and small rodents, who capture the birds as they sleep and may even eat their eggs.

Paradoxically, some of New York City's busiest neighborhoods are the best places to see hummingbirds. As summer fades and autumn overtakes our native wildflowers, hummers depend more and more on planted flowers. The lavish warm and cool gardens of Wagner Park at the Battery Park City Parks Conservancy, and the cultivated areas of Central Park, often host more hummingbirds at this time of year than more natural spaces, where plants are readying for winter and flowers are scarce. DAVE TAFT



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