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Innovation at the pumps

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SMARTER TO MARKET

INSIDE Malfara brothers join forces with new-to-Canada fuel brand Inver to enhance the business equation at their three Ontario locations

PLUS 5 Wash trends to watch

A CHANGE FOR THE BETTER

New fuel brand motivates Ontario service station group By Kelly Gray



PHOTOS Brian Pieters

The Malfara family came to Canada from Italy in the 1950s to start a new life in the Toronto area. Today, car repair and fuel customers in southern Ontario are glad they did. The Malfara brothers, Joe and Vito, individually operate three locations—Burlington, Etobicoke and Toronto—under the new-to-Canada Inver banner and have earned reputations as trusted mechanics and value-oriented fuel dealers.

Vito Malfara, a retired educator and school principal, who now operates a fuel and automotive repair site in Burlington and co-owns another location on Rogers Road in Toronto, tells *OCTANE* that it was older brother Frank that got the family going on service stations. “He had stayed behind in Italy to finish his mechanics’ apprenticeship before joining the family here in Canada. After working for others in the Toronto area, he leased his own Texaco station in the early 1960s,” says Vito, adding that the promise of a better location a few years later brought his father (also Frank) into the business. The family established a partnership agreement and went to work. “My brother was behind the auto repair, while my father was the person behind the customer service. My father Frank had little English and he didn’t even have a drivers’ licence, but he understood respect and the value of treating people fairly and delivering on the service promise. He taught us well and, while he is no longer alive, we take his attitude and attention to detail forward with businesses that still carry his name.”

Over more than 50 years the Malfaras have had experience with fuel suppliers, including Texaco, Fina, XTR, Econo Petroleum, OCLA, Global, Congo and Esso, as well as others. “We’ve dealt with a lot of companies as dealers and often found the relationships challenging,” says Vito remembering how suppliers would often be great to deal with the first year of an agreement and then start nickel and diming them and having trouble with deliveries. “This is why we decided to go with Inver, a new retail fuel brand just introduced to Canada. We researched and saw how popular the brand was in Ireland and we discovered it was run by Greenergy, a Brookfield company (Greenergy was purchased by Toronto-based Brookfield Business Partners in 2017). Greenergy has three decades of experience and success in the retail fuel supply industry. This gave us confidence the brand would be supported,” says Vito, mentioning that it was one of his customers who provided the contact with the company. “Greenergy was looking for dealers in Ontario and the fact we have three sites made a great fit.”

Full automotive service is offered at the Malfara’s three locations, which include Malfara Automotive at 500 Browns Line in Etobicoke, Frank Malfara Service Centre at 165 Rogers Road in Toronto and Frank Malfara Service Centre at 4032 New Street. Burlington. This includes tires, oil changes, rust proofing



and general mechanical. They also offer Inver branded diesel and three ranges of gasoline. “We were tired of our suppliers not meeting delivery deadlines. Gasoline is very competitive. If you cannot provide the product, customers will go across the street and you have to fight to win them back. We saw that Inver was supplied from a growing number of rail-to-road terminals strategically placed around Ontario. To us, this meant greater dependability. They were also able to offer us a better rack rate that included transport. This was more competitive than the others we had been dealing with. Even more, Inver and Greenergy were willing to make invest-

ments in the forecourt with dispensers and computerized price-setting systems,” says Vito, adding they were pleased to discover that Greenergy staff would pick up the phone when he called with a question. “Our experience with other suppliers was that you were often on your own. It could take days and days to get a return call on an issue or challenge at the pumps.”

Inver is currently present in Ontario at five locations under banner and its gasoline products, supplied by Greenergy, are getting traction with independents looking for a change. Sites include Burlington. Etobicoke, Toronto and Thunder Bay, where two new operations have just opened.

Service sells

All the Malfara brothers’ sites are full-serve operations. Indeed, a customer who time travelled from 1968 would see little difference in the attendant service. Customers pull in and are often greeted by name. Attendants fill the tank, check the tires and oil and wipe down all the windows. Little mechanical issues, such as a burned-out tail-light or a stuck door latch, can be handled quickly with customers often not having to leave the car.

Vito reports that their forecourt attendants, three in Burlington, four in Toronto and two in Etobicoke, use mobile credit and debit card readers to further the convenience. “When we tried to institute the use of mobile card readers we had a challenge from our fuel supplier at the time. They (Econo Petroleum) told us they did not think it was safe and would not permit us to use them. We could see that the trade literature was saying that myth had already been discounted as fiction and we decided to go with better customer service and the mobile readers. We also saw this as a move by our supplier to limit our ability to meet customer demands. We don’t sell candy or chips or lottery tickets. We just sell automotive service and we work to do that at a very high level. Gas is what gets people onto the site, but it’s our commitment to customers and the quality of our repairs that keep them coming back,” he says, adding that they don’t charge for service and their Inver gasoline is often 0.1cent cheaper than the nearby ‘low price’ Pioneer station. “It’s the repair business that pays the bills,” says Vito mentioning that their oil changes (\$10 cheaper than Mr. Lube) are their number one service followed by brakes and then tires.

“In this business, customers often come in unhappy. Their cars are broken. We want them to leave in a good mood and this is our mission every day. Having the right suppliers, as well as energetic well-intentioned staff, and convenient locations, are all part of what we see as a winning business equation.” **OCTANE**