



A young Andrew Kemeny at the store.



Lesley Kemeny at the store in the early days.



Gabor Kemeny (on bike) and Andrew Kemeny.



Emma and Leslie Kemeny.

Kemenys celebrates

Arguably Australia's most successful family-owned liquor retailing store, Kemenys in Sydney's eastern suburbs, this year celebrates 50 years of trade. **Katrina Holden** reports on the beginnings of the retailer and what has been the key to not only surviving, but thriving.

In 1960, Leslie and Emma Kemeny started up their store, L&E Kemeny Delicatessen in Bondi Road, Bondi, New South Wales. The couple had arrived in Australia just three years prior with nothing, having escaped war-torn Hungary. Emma Kemeny recalls: "After living our entire lives without being responsible for our own destiny, we finally had something of our own. Groceries and small goods were our focus to start with. We wanted people to experience the flavours of Europe beyond devon, corned beef and ham, which is all we could buy at the time." So Emma and Leslie put their focus into finding gourmet providores throughout Sydney who could supply a delectable range

of salami, paté and cheeses to a growing and curious clientele.

The wine side of the business was slower to establish, as in 1960, Emma and Leslie by law could only sell wine in two-gallon lots. At that time, brandy was the biggest-selling liquor in the store. It wasn't until the late 1960s that modified liquor licensing laws enabled the sale of individual bottles.

"I was horrified in 1972 when Leslie first sold Penfolds Grange at \$12.99 a bottle. 'No wine can be worth that much!' I said. But in only a few hours, it had all sold. That was the turning point for the fine wine side of the business. Our customers wanted quality and that meant we would offer it to them," said Emma.

To expand the growing wine side of the business, the couple purchased the next-door dry cleaning business in 1972. Leslie Kemeny, through his networking and ability to build relationships with key members of the Australian wine industry, was able to ensure top wines were seen on the Kemeny shelves first, ahead of other retailers. This tradition continues to be part of the Kemenys philosophy today, with sons and directors Gabor and Andrew Kemeny both actively involved in the business.

Sadly, in 1986, Leslie passed away suddenly. Gabor and Andrew stepped up to the challenge in support of their mother and to continue their father's passion. "It was a very vulnerable time personally and business-wise," said Emma. "We had a successful store, and several corporations wanted to be part of it. As a family, we stood together to protect our business and maintain the independence of the Kemeny name."



Andrew Kemeny (back) with Gabor Kemeny (front).

It's not unusual to regularly find Emma Kemeny attending to aisles in the store, still to this day.

Today, Kemenys now employs between 80 and 100 staff (depending on the time of year) and some of those worked with Leslie and are considered part of the family. Staff are divided between the warehouse and the Bondi store.

Gabor and Andrew continue in the business. Gabor is an active director with expertise in IT, providing a key contribution to the growth of the business. Andrew is an active director and continues on Leslie's legacy in building and maintaining relationships with suppliers. At present, Gabor is focussed on the new Kemeny's website to get online purchasing up and running. "Like everything we have always done, it is a hands-on process," said Andrew Kemeny.

Andrew also explained that a new website will be launched in October.

"Our customers can expect the service Kemenys is known for in an online format – that being the fastest delivery of any retailer in Australia. We deliberately held back from online ordering until we could guarantee a flawless system, and one that wouldn't compromise either the personal sales or mail-order side of the business. The common link will be our catalogue, Wine Dominion, which will have additional editorial content to educate our customers and help them make informed choices.

Taking Kemenys further into the future and ensuring they stay up-to-date with consumer trends and the way consumers shop, Andrew and Kemenys embrace online social media. "I have personally been using Facebook and Twitter for a while now, and learning just how powerful a tool they can be for business and establishing our personality with customers and suppliers. As a family-owned business,

personality is one of the things we have that our multi-national competitors can't compete with. We will be amping this up in a more strategic way once the new website is operational," said Andrew.

It's not unusual to regularly find Emma Kemeny attending to aisles in the store, still to this day. "We started this business with a simple promise: a good range, good service, and great value. Leslie's name now means that to people all over Sydney – and across the country. It is for him that we are Australia's number one wine merchant."

Gabor and Andrew consider it a "privilege" to continue the work of their parents.

"I am most proud, quite simply, of Kemenys still being here in Bondi Road after 50 years, flying the flag for independent retailing," said Andrew. "I am also incredibly proud of the relationships we have built with suppliers and winemakers. Of course, the past few years have been incredibly tough for winemakers and independent retailers. We have created ways that we can work together to weather the storm – and create great value for our customers. In terms of the qualities Gabe and I have inherited from our parents – the most obvious to me is that if the going gets tough, just keep on going. Even though we have been through tough times – and I know there will be plenty of even tougher times ahead – nothing can compare to what my parents went through to build this store," said Andrew. "They never gave up, and nor will we."

NB: Information on the store's early history and quotes from Emma Kemeny provided courtesy of Fiona Sainty, from Farm13, following an extensive interview.