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At 78, Don Yuen is stepping back and has handed over daily operations of Fairway Markets to son Doug Yuen.

# A grocer's humble roots

## Don Yuen founded Fairway Markets and built a local empire from scratch

BY ANDREW A. DUFFY, TIMES COLONIST MAY 31, 2011

He may be a man of few words, especially when it comes to talking about himself. But Don Yuen's work ethic and success speak volumes.

So does the fact the moment the founder and chairman of Fairway Markets sets foot on the floor of what was his first store he's immediately and warmly greeted by a senior shopper doing her rounds in the refrigerated aisle. "She's been shopping here since I started," Yuen said with a broad grin after a brief conversation mid-aisle at Fairway's Gorge location.

That kind of connection with the community - quiet, subtle but very real - is clearly important to Yuen and his locally-grown grocery empire, which will boast 10 stores and more than 800 employees this summer when its Brentwood Bay location opens.

It's also that connection and commitment to his adopted home that earned Yuen the lifetime achievement award last week from the Ethno Business Council of B.C., a body that recognizes and celebrates the achievements of new-Canadian entrepreneurs. "I was very excited by that . it was very nice," said Yuen, who is not one to wax on about his own achievements.

"That's my dad, he's very humble, he's not out there," said Doug Yuen, who recently took over as president and CEO of Fairway Markets when his father decided to step back a bit from the family business. "He just does things that make him feel good, things that are good for his customers. He's a humble, quiet person who is not looking for attention."

Understated may be his style and that of the company he built, but there's nothing shy and retiring about Fairway Markets' growth from humble roots.

Yuen left China for Vancouver Island in 1950 and started to work for his uncle in the grocery business in Duncan.

Though the business was in his blood - Don Yuen is a third-generation grocer making Doug a fourth - he left his uncle's grocery to spend eight years working in a sawmill.

"Now that was hard work," he recalls with another broad smile.

But it also allowed him to put some money away and in 1963 he bought a 5,000 square foot Super Valu store at the corner of Gorge and Tillicum roads.

He rebuilt and expanded the store significantly in 1972, and in 1983 he started the expansion process with a second location. It's a process that continued this year with the new store in Brentwood Bay, expected to be open in July after a complete rebuild.

"I've been in this business nearly 50 years, that's a long time," he said while walking down the aisles of the first store.

But he's not the kind of guy to spend his time looking back. "I look forward, more things, new things happening, more things to do and keep going," he said. "I'm interested in seeing it keep going, growing more just like the city."

And that's why Don Yuen has handed the reins to his son Doug.

"I think you have someone younger, more new energy and more new look and everything," said Don. "I feel better, the old generation are different than the new generation - they are looking for different things and being more up to date."

The elder Yuen knows that's what people want.

For Doug, it's clearly both about carrying on a family tradition and exploring the marketplace.

"What's next is to improve what we have now, to renew and grow what we currently have, little tweaks and changes," he said, noting there is an ongoing move to update stores, expand offerings like the popular salad bars wherever possible and bringing in a wide range of ethnic foods.

Fairway recently expanded its British foods section and are the only store to import Marks and Spencer's food offerings to cater to the large British population in Victoria. The stores have also established Caribbean, Korean, Japanese, Chinese and Mexican food lines. "It's because Canada is so multicultural," said Doug Yuen.

"See, that's the new generation," Don Yuen said. "New ideas people like."

Whether new moves for the company will mean further expansion remains to be seen, said Doug, noting they are always looking for the right location.

"But we're not huge enough that we can just put in a store to stop someone else from going in there," he said with a nod to the tight and competitive local market.

"The business is getting more and more competitive every day, there are many new people entering the marketplace and it's constantly changing. You really need to be on top of your game."

Doug will still be able to rely on his dad's experience and advice when tough decisions have to be made. "He doesn't look after the day-to-day operations but he's still involved with a lot of decision making, we talk a lot and we work really well together," said the younger Yuen who has worked with his dad for 28 years. "[The transition] has been wonderful, he's a great mentor and of course we have the family history - it's in the blood."

Don agrees, and is quick to point out he's a very young 78. "I sure don't feel that way, I still feel like I did 20 years ago, my mind is still sharp and fresh."

But he is going to enjoy being able to take more of a break, to go on holidays and to spend more time watching his Vancouver Canucks.

"I was at the last game [against San Jose] when they won the series, it was really exciting," he said. "All night in Vancouver everyone was celebrating. I got back to the hotel at 12, but it was so much fun you don't feel tired."

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