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Sharing Success: Thoughts from Tom Cortopassi

The Basement Rule!

One of my favorite days each winter is when many of my family members gather to make homemade salami and sausage. This family tradition started in Italy many generations ago and thankfully came to America with my Nonno (grandfather) Amerigo and his closest relatives.

We stick to our traditional family recipe – of course! Each recipe was perfected over decades into an exact blend of premium lean meats, seasonings, and other ingredients (all precisely measured by weight) all mixed together and then filled into natural casings. We are even particular about using the exact right type of twine to tie each and every salami. Once filled and tied, our salami is then hung and cured where we control the environment (humidity and temperature) in a special aging cellar that was designed and built solely for that purpose.

Our family and close friends really like our salami and sausage the way it is, so changing the recipe is not going to happen.

From time to time, we have someone new involved in the special day (a new in-law, a cousin that comes for the first time, etc.). Invariably, the “newbie” will suggest how to improve the sausage. While making sausage in Cousin Raymond Avansino’s basement, a first-time participant suggested adding more chili powder to give it a little more spiciness.

In a very polite “Italian way,” but at a volume in which everyone in the basement could hear, Raymond explained why the recipe was not going to change. “This is my basement. When we make sausage in my basement, we follow my family recipe. If you make sausage in your basement, I will gladly help you and happily follow your recipe.” After this short, but highly impactful speech, there was no more talk about recipe changes!

I think there is a business lesson in **Cousin Raymond’s Basement Rule.**

In today’s business climate, many progressive companies pride themselves on being “category disruptors” or “change agents.” It is not uncommon to see popular, well-established products/brands undergo changes touted as “new and improved” or “reformulated.” Those business leaders today who are focused on doing things differently would disagree with Cousin Raymond. But here is why I wholeheartedly endorse the “Basement Rule!”

• **Customers crave consistency!** Once a product has earned popularity with a group of consumers, repeat purchases occur because the buyer has expectations. In the

case of food, if a customer buys your product and it tastes different from the last time, she will be unhappy. For example, there is a food truck near my house that serves authentic Mexican food. My first couple of visits turned me into a huge fan! But the next few stops yielded food beyond my spice tolerance, so, sadly, I stopped going.

• **You can’t be all things to all people!** Businesspeople need to understand that a product cannot satisfy every consumer. If 70 out of 100 people strongly approve of a product, it makes no sense to make adjustments hoping to win the other 30. You risk losing the majority in pursuit of the minority.

• **Improvement isn’t “change.”** Sticking to traditional recipes does not mean you are avoiding improvement or averse to change. Raymond has never avoided purchasing modern equipment, better supplies, or higher quality ingredients in the pursuit of further enhancing the quality and/or consistency of the sausage and salami. Although Raymond is not interested in increasing the spiciness of our sausage, he has never missed an opportunity to further improve the quality.

• **R&D is always an option!** If you have an established product with a loyal customer base but see an untapped market opportunity (like a spicier sausage), *don’t mess with the original.* Instead consider offering a SECOND unique product with its own name and positioning!

The bottom line is that “change for change’s sake” is never a good strategy. Conversely, rejecting all change will lead to missed opportunities for further improvement.

I can tell you from experience that while we have never changed our original recipe, our family’s sausage and salami has grown even better and more consistent over time.

For that we can thank Cousin Raymond’s Basement Rule AND our family’s stubborn insistence on always seeking ways to further improve quality!

Until next time, Ciao!

Tom Cortopassi

Tom Cortopassi
President and Co-Owner



IDEA EXCHANGE FOR INDEPENDENT RESTAURATEURS

BUSINESS BUILDERS: CREATIVE SOLUTIONS

Best of Both Worlds

For three decades, *Frank’s Pizza and Pasta* has satisfied Baltimore locals with great-tasting Italian specialties.

To appeal to both younger and older takeout customers, second-generation owner Gerry Buontempo offers BOTH online electronic ordering to attract younger consumers and voice-to-voice phone ordering to satisfy older regulars. Adding electronic ordering has helped Gerry expand his customer base. As a result, more than half of Gerry’s takeout orders now arrive electronically through his POS and flow seamlessly to his kitchen “ticket printer.”



Over time, this has also helped boost Gerry’s labor efficiency as a growing share of orders no longer require phone staff or cashiers. Since online customers confirm their own order accuracy before committing, order-taking errors and remakes are down as well. Operational benefits aside, adding electronic ordering has kept the pizzeria *relevant to the growing share of younger takeout customers who simply won’t order voice-to-voice.*

Because his old school regulars still strongly prefer the familiarity and warmth of voice-to-voice conversations, Gerry’s team makes each caller feel special and appreciated! But whether takeout service is warm and welcoming or electronically seamless, it’s Gerry’s great tasting food which keeps them coming back for more!

Gerry Buontempo, Owner
Frank’s Pizza and Pasta
Baltimore, MD

Slow for Great Italian!

The driveway entrance to Jolene DeFranco’s deli and catering kitchen is located on a blind corner of a winding rural road. Departing



customers are sometimes surprised by fast vehicles appearing around the bend.



To reduce potential accidents and boost awareness of their location, the DeFrancos mounted large roadside signs ahead of the curve in both directions reading “Please Slow Down ... Great Tasting Italian Food Ahead!” As a result, traffic speeds are down and first-time visits by curious locals are up!

Jolene and Joe DeFranco
Joe DeFranco and Daughters Catering
Bangor, PA

Share your proven business-building tips and if we publish your idea, we’ll send you \$100! Your tip can deal with any aspect of your business as long as it has added to your success. While we would like to give you credit, we will respect your wishes to remain anonymous if you prefer.

For a free full-sized 18” x 24” version of our 2023 Pizza Expo poster, come see us at Pizza Expo Booth #1611!

SUCCESS STORY:

ANDY'S PIZZA WASHINGTON DC

A few years ago, Andy Brown convinced a successful pizzeria owner to teach him the business. In the process, he fell in love with the art and science of pizza baking. Opening his own place in 2018, Andy focused on learning all he could about dough preparation, fermentation, and hydration to the gentle handling techniques which influence crust texture and density!

In addition to perfecting his own dough recipe, Andy worked to identify the most flavorful, highest quality ingredients and toppings, by repeatedly comparing top brands in blind, side-by-side tastings. Soon his clientele began to grow as Word of Mouth spread about his place.

To keep perfecting "the main thing," Andy limited his menu to strictly pizza and a variety of premium craft beers, wines, and sodas in single cans. To help guests keep multiple beverages chilled, he also sells reusable coolers and throws in the ice for free.

Despite the Pandemic, the popularity of Andy's Pizza kept growing, leading him to open a second store, followed by a third.

To help maximize baking consistency, especially across multiple locations, Andy's team solely offers 18" pizzas sold by the slice or the pie. Sticking to a single size helps standardize bake times across different pie versions and simplifies ingredient portioning as well.

Since Andy can't be everywhere at once, he also encourages his kitchen leads across shops to hold each other accountable to

attractive presentation. He has them each post photos daily onto a text thread shared by the entire team showing off their best freshly baked slice pies on display and ready for the lunch rush!

To further reinforce employee pride in quality from Day #1, all new hires including counter staff begin their training by tasting Andy's premium olive oil, tomatoes, mozzarella, and 24-month aged Parmigiano Reggiano head-to-head vs. the best available super-market versions. Having them taste the flavor difference premium ingredients make also helps Andy explain his premium menu pricing versus other restaurants. ("It costs more to make the best!")

Because slice quality declines with holding time, Andy limits his selection of slice pies to a short list of the most popular flavor combinations. By only offering the most popular versions (and avoiding slow-sellers), Andy keeps his slices tasting their freshest due to their frequent turnover.



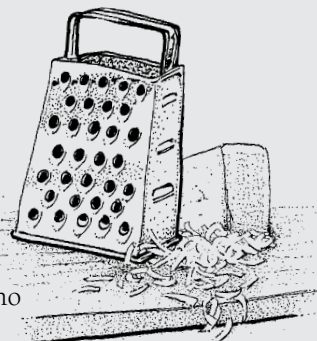
As part of Andy's drive to further hone his craft, he regularly competes in pizza-baking competitions. In 2022, he placed first at Pizza Expo in the traditional pizza category! Meanwhile, Andy's sales continue to grow across multiple locations! Bravo!

LA VERA CUCINA: POLLO FRANCESE

A favorite comfort food for Chicago restaurateurs Vicki and Michael Nelson and their family is Pollo Francese. Especially for Vicki, who grew up in an Italian restaurant family, the aroma of chicken browning with freshly cut lemons instantly rekindles fond memories of enjoying this dish at a favorite ristorante back in New York - *The Milanese Restaurant* in Poughkeepsie. While the Nelsons prefer vividly robust lemon flavor and aroma, they suggest adjusting lemon levels to your own family's tastes!

Chicken Ingredients:

- 4 boneless chicken breasts pounded out
- 1/3 cup All Purpose Flour
- 1/2 teaspoon salt
- 1/2 teaspoon pepper
- 2 eggs
- 1 tablespoons heavy cream
- 1 tablespoon fresh parsley
- 1 tablespoon freshly grated Parmigiano Reggiano
- 1/3 cup extra virgin olive oil



Sauce Ingredients:

- 6 tablespoons butter, divided for use
- 1 large lemon thinly sliced
- 1/2 cup white wine (one you would drink)
- 1 clove garlic, finely minced
- 2 cups chicken broth
- 1-2 tablespoons cornstarch slurry
- 2 tablespoons lemon juice (taste before adding and adjust)
- 1/2 teaspoon fresh parsley

Instructions for Chicken:

1. Pound out chicken between plastic wrap until you have thin cutlets; lightly salt and pepper cutlets.
2. Mix flour, salt, and pepper in a bowl.
3. Whisk eggs, heavy cream, Parmigiano Reggiano, and parsley in a bowl until smooth.
4. In a large skillet, heat olive oil over medium heat.
5. Dredge chicken in flour and then egg wash.
6. Place two chicken cutlets into the pan at a time to avoid crowding.
7. Cook approximately 4-6 minutes per side until golden brown.
8. Remove chicken from pan and place on paper towel; cover to keep warm. Wipe out pan with paper towel.

Instructions for Sauce:

1. Heat 3 tablespoons butter in pan over medium flame. Add lemon slices and cook until brown, approximately 3 minutes per side. Remove lemon slices and place on top of chicken for presentation.
2. Pour in white wine, add garlic, and simmer for 3 minutes.
3. Add chicken broth and simmer another 5 minutes.
4. Add rest of butter.
5. Add cornstarch slurry to thicken.
6. Add lemon juice to taste (the Nelsons prefer a strong lemon flavor).
7. Return chicken to pan and spoon sauce over.
8. Plate your choice of pasta and place chicken on top of pasta. Pour sauce over chicken and garnish with sliced lemons and fresh parsley.

KEY IDEA: OVERCOMING OVEN CAPACITY

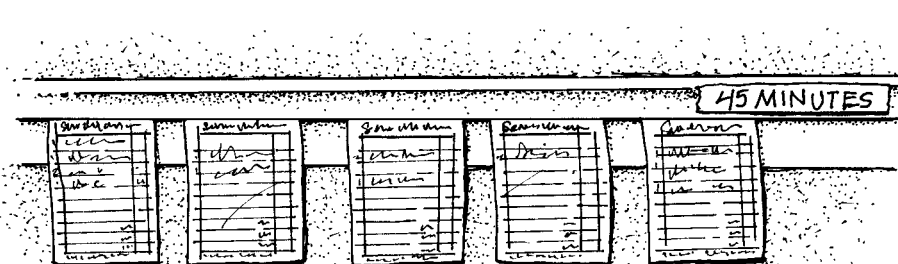
At their cozy Philadelphia storefront pizzeria *Pizzetta*, co-owners Davide Lubrano and Vinny Gallagher specialize in sourdough pizzas made with traditional starters and lengthy rise times. Their crust's signature flavor and especially light, airy texture has made *Pizzetta* increasingly popular with locals. Growth has been a mixed blessing as rising customer demand increasingly bumps up against their current oven capacity.

The partners are particularly sensitive to not allowing peak oven capacity to sacrifice "bake quality." That is, trying to push too many pies through a busy oven prevents the deck from properly reheating, risking disappointing customers with soft "underbaked" pies. They also don't want excessive wait times to disappoint their best regulars.

They plan to eventually tear out a fryer to add more deck ovens. But until then, they have come up with some unique steps to solve the capacity challenge.

First, they determined an upper limit to orders they can properly bake per hour to still allow proper deck heating. When they start approaching this limit, they adjust their online order-taking software to reduce the number of online orders it will accept per hour. As a result, online consumers find that they can only access a limited number of oven "time slots" staggered through the evening. Metering online demand allows David and Vinny to keep things timely for both in-person guests and phone orders.

To alert the team to demand levels, they marked the bar where they queue side-by-side make tickets with strips of white masking tape to indicate when the line of tickets hits 30, 45, and 60 minute wait times. Whenever the ticket queue reaches a higher marker, the staff calls it out ("45 minutes") to focus everyone on not missing a beat.



To keep their oven baking at peak efficiency, they store key ingredient stocks close at hand to avoid having to leave the prep area during the dinner rush. Davide and Vinny have also physically reconfigured their prep area, including moving equipment and rewiring several times to further minimize travel distance between make tables, the oven, and where finished pies are cut and plated or boxed.

Even after the new ovens arrive, streamlining and simplifying their kitchen configuration will continue to pay off as the restaurant grows even busier!

Davide Lubrano and Vinny Gallagher, Co-Owners
Pizatta Pizzeria
Philadelphia, PA

If we publish your idea, we'll send you \$100!

La Trattoria's proven ideas come from successful Independent restaurateurs like you. What are you doing differently in your business (besides making great food) that adds to your success? If we publish your idea, we'll send \$100 to say "Grazie!" Call me, La Trattoria Editor Steve Rouse, at (800) 328-8667!



WHY INDEPENDENTS SHOULD CONSIDER ATTENDING PIZZA EXPO



Tom and Maureen in our Stanislaus Cucina at Pizza Expo 2018. Because Pizza Expo attracts so many of "our kind" of quality-oriented Independents, our company has attended every year since 1992.

To Our Restaurateur Friends

Pizza Expo is a one-of-a-kind trade show focused on providing Independent pizzerias and Italian restaurateurs proven ideas and information of value.

For example, most of the top-quality educational seminars on everything from marketing to finding and keeping great employees are designed and presented by other successful Independents.

This year's Pizza Expo is being held March 28th to 30th in Las Vegas, NV. (By the way, we don't happen to have any "free passes" or "discount tickets.")

If you have never attended, you might consider doing so. Many successful Independent operators have told us that attending Pizza Expo is a worthwhile investment for further enhancing the quality of their food and sharpening their business skills.

Tom and Maureen

P.S. If you go to Pizza Expo, please come say "Hi!" to us and our team at Booth # 1611. We look forward to seeing you!

For more information on attending Pizza Expo in Las Vegas, visit their website at www.pizzaexpo.com.