

Fouad Qreitem

When Business is Personal

"You guys make the best food," remarked the man, as he laid down the bills to pay for his pizza. "Not to mention that your customer service is amazing. How come I've never heard of you?"

"We're new," remarked Fouad Qreitem, President and CEO of Paisano's Pizza Restaurant.

It was 1999, less than a year after Paisano's had first opened its doors. The man thanked Fouad and left the store to its typical hustle and bustle, but the small restaurant's luck was about to change forever. Three weeks later, an article was published in the Washington Post recounting the exceptional quality and service of a certain local hidden-gem pizza joint, written by the very same man who had so generously complemented its young owner. "Almost immediately after the write-up hit newsstands, our business doubled," Fouad remembers.

At twenty-four years of age, Fouad founded Paisano's in 1998 along with his sister, Cathy, when the pair opened their first store in Fair Lakes. Cathy stayed with the company for the first four to five years of the endeavor, a time of backbreaking work and high tension, as they didn't receive a paycheck for the entirety of their first year in business. "Until you've worked for free, you don't know what work is," he remarks now, still incredulous at the thought of his twelve-hour workdays and sometimes seven-day workweeks. When he married in 1999, he took only four days off for his honeymoon. "I definitely paid my dues," he says. "Still, I enjoyed it because I knew it was all me. I knew that if I failed, at least it would be because of me and not because of somebody else."

Thankfully, Fouad led Paisano's down a far different road and never had to confront such failure. In fact, his flagship store has maintained a minimum growth rate of twenty percent for each of the thirteen years since it opened. The restaurant incurred so much positive attention that

he opened another one in 2001, cementing his original success into systematic operations that he could then replicate in new environments. After the subsequent opening five additional stores, he then decided to transition Paisano's into a franchise in June of 2009. The groundwork for the initiative took a year and a half to complete, and now with the operation in its fledgling stages, six franchises have been sold so far. With two already open and two more scheduled to open in the fourth quarter of 2010, still others are slated to follow soon after. Fouad ultimately hopes to own twenty corporate stores as is particularly excited about his upcoming Tyson's Corner location, scheduled to open later this year.

Surprisingly, Paisano's is exactly the opposite of what franchisees would have been looking for seven to ten years ago. With a menu that is varied and complex, previous models would have deemed it too expansive to replicate, with franchise restaurants typically sticking with menus of several simple items. Now, however, the trend is toward diversity, and Paisano's is poised far ahead of the curve. "The secret to our success has been our continued ability to provide quality menu choices with items to satisfy a wide range of tastes and using only the best ingredients," Fouad explains. "There is really something for everyone."

While many people struggle with finding their passion and vocation in life, Fouad knew from an early age that his professional path lay in the restaurant business. In fact, when his sixth grade class penned pictures of their futures for a time capsule that would be opened many years down the line, Fouad's portrait mirrored today's reality to a tee. This sense of certainty stemmed in part from the thorough immersion he had in the industry from a very early age, as his father and uncles were restaurant owners themselves. The



men owned The Black Orchid, a French continental cuisine restaurant that was recognized as one of the best in the area. They also opened a small dine-in and delivery pizza place down the street. He hired top chefs for each of his establishments, which did wonders for The Black Orchid but made little economical sense for the pizzeria—a fact that Fouad would note and put into practice later in his own business.

Fouad was five years old when his father first opened the pizza establishment, and he was always envious of his cousins who got to have the “fun” job delivering pizzas while he was stuck in the fine dining restaurant. From the time he was very young, he can remember his parents’ unwavering commitment to the restaurants and recalls instances in which they would stop by the establishments on their days off with the children and spend hours enmeshed in the business. Beginning at age ten, Fouad would work as well, hanging coats and manning the coffee station. “I didn’t have much of a childhood,” he remarks now. He later graduated on to dishwashing and eventually served as *maitre d’*. “As a teenager I would get out of school at 2:30, arrive at the restaurant by 4:30, and then wouldn’t get home till around 12:00 A.M.,” he reports.

While many people assume that his present-day success stems from the work-oriented environment he knew in his youth, Fouad is not so sure. He did, however, have the opportunity to observe his father’s unparalleled customer service skills, which he acknowledges as being paramount in shaping his leadership style. “As soon as someone would become somewhat regular, my father would give them the royal treatment. Even if there was a line out the door, he would spot you and drag you in to a table you didn’t even call to reserve,” Fouad laughs. “You can’t find his level of attentiveness anywhere today.” Fouad has modeled his own customer service as such, striving to always go above and beyond to turn every customer interaction into an exceptional experience. Each customer call is recorded in a log sheet, and managers follow up with any issue in which someone may not be 100 percent satisfied with their experience. These kinds of safety nets are designed such that no customer service issue slips through the cracks, and it has paid back in spades over the years.

Another key to the success of Paisano’s has been a business model in which administrative

and overhead matters are largely performed by one office, thereby allowing store managers to focus solely on customer service, product quality, payroll, and scheduling. “I then supplement this by meeting with the managers weekly to have an open table group discussion,” says Fouad. “We go through an agenda and discuss our ideas, focusing on what works and what doesn’t work.”

When he isn’t engaged in these meetings, he is engaged in other meetings. In fact, Fouad spends three days a week just meeting with vendors and brokers, working hard to keep each restaurant up to his standards while adding new establishments to the map. Despite this flurry of activity, however, he prioritizes time at home with his family as well. “My two girls are my greatest successes,” he says of his daughters, age nine and five. “As children, we became self-sufficient at a young age because both our parents worked such long hours at the restaurants to provide for us.” Thus, balancing family with work is of the utmost importance to him now. He achieves this balance largely through the dedication and strength of his wife, who serves as an unparalleled support system in his life.

The key to attaining a success in which this work-life balance is possible, according to Fouad, is to maintain a rock-solid work ethic in which one sets goals and then meets or exceeds them every time. “People used to tell me I wasn’t going to make it, but this would just fuel my conviction more,” he reflects. He also maintains a “no excuse” policy to guide the journey of accomplishing these goals and would advise any young entrepreneur today to do the same. “You can always come up with a reason for why business is bad, no matter what the season,” he says. “Instead, commit yourself to the expectation that business should be good year-round.” Maintaining this mindset places one in a very unique category; one that isn’t common in today’s marketplace.

This commitment to setting and surpassing goals spills over into the philanthropic activities of the company as well. Fouad has been particularly committed to the Police Unity Tour, a bike ride honoring law enforcement officers who lost their lives in the line of duty and aiming to raise money for the National Law Enforcement Officers Memorial and Museum. Paisano’s aims to raise \$100,000 for the cause in 2011. The restaurant also supports Rachel D’Andrea, a little girl from

the local community with a rare and deadly form of cancer, by donating two dollars from every large pizza sold on Monday nights to her fund. The funds assist with the mounting debt her parents are incurring for medical expenses, allowing them to focus more time on Rachel. Additionally, after Thanksgiving, all Paisano's locations set up a drop-off donation box collecting canned goods for people in need. "Helping people in Fairfax county means a lot to me," Fouad explains.

This mindset is perfectly in keeping with the overarching tenet behind the Paisano's philosophy, which is firmly committed to the strong personal relationships characterizing everything they do. "I always encourage our managers to develop relationships with our clients," says Fouad. The ideology at work behind the company is that every person must be considered a valued customer from their very first order. Having a genuine passion and sincere concern about each individual's experience is something Fouad has never regretted, especially when he ventures into his original store in Fair Lakes and spends time just chatting with old friends and customers. It makes sense, then, that despite his tremendous plans for continued

franchising, he hopes to keep his stores local. Contracted to have fifty locations throughout the DC metro area in the next five years, he still hopes to be able to get in his car and visit different stores, continuing to develop the kind of relationships that have gotten him to where he is today. "I love what I do," he emphasizes. "It's not just about money, it's personal."

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