

Mike Ricci 0:08

There's two different because there's people that are just in the industry and it's sort of transient that way. You know, economies push you one way or the other way. But there's very few places, I guess, that have been around for a long time. Or as long as us these days anyways.

Italian Canadian Foodways 0:27

You've been in busienss over 30 years, right?

Mike Ricci 0:30

Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So 1985 so it's a long time.

Italian Canadian Foodways 0:36

Yeah, it is. And that was your first location was Malton.

Mike Ricci 0:41

That's right. That's in Malton, Mississauga. That's where we grew up. Okay. So when my parents immigrated here (my parents are not restaurant people by trade) and they're immigrants like everything, they came here like everybody else. They came here in the mid [19]60s. My dad worked wherever he could get work. And he was a trades person for most of his career. I mean, we didn't open the first store until he was 50 years old. So before then, he worked in every facet of construction, like most Italians at the time, and then he got sick. And that's sort of why we sort of came together as a family to try something different for sustenance. Yeah, that's how basic it was. You know, when we started out, my mom, again, she was the typical Italian woman, but she worked. They did shift work when they got here. And after she finished having kids (there's four of us), we lived at basically the Queensway and Eglinton, that's sort of where everybody immigrated from-my parents, probably both of their hometowns. There's a lot of them that are still there, in and around a church that was there and was also in their hometown. Sorry. I mean, when they immigrated over here, my mom is from Puglia. So she's from near Foggia. So my mom is really looking for jobs. And my dad is from a town called San Bartolomeo in Galdo, which is a part of Campania. So there's a mountain range in between them. And so the story goes, it was town to town, and they met at one of their their summer fairs.

Mike Ricci 3:01

So yeah, anyways, my mom was actually quite the entrepreneur. She didn't have a grasp of the language, but she used to sell I mean, back in the 70s, there was all kinds of [multi level marketing companies]. But she did very well at the selling these copper items that used to be put on everybody's wall. And, you know, even back then, without the language, she won trips and, and stuff like this. Anyways, after that, she ended up working at a restaurant close by to our house. And so that's sort of where the vein of the restaurant came in, on top of, you know, family recipes. And, she was always an awesome cook (like everybody would probably profess their mother is). And then she dragged my oldest brother (as his first job) to work at this local restaurant. And so he was probably 13 or 14. So this whole thing came about because we had to find something to, you know, feed our family, opening a restaurant. [My brother] was probably about 18 [or] 19 making a decision of whether or not to go to university. So he opted out, and we ended up opening up, literally right around the corner from our house, [Ricci's]. And yeah, that's sort of where the story started with restaurants, you know, pulling recipes that we had and stuff that they had learned (the basic stuff), and then the business evolved over so much time.

Italian Canadian Foodways 4:59

So would you say that your mom was the founder or was it your family as a collective?

Mike Ricci 5:07

It's our, I would say, our family as a collective. But it was my my mom and my oldest brother that would have had the experience. I was 15, my younger sister, Laura, 13. And another brother, the older brother in between, would have been 17. Joe was 19. And then my parents, right, so they had the experience, and we were the soldiers at that point, following instructions and learning as we went. And we were very lucky, because I guess there was a real need (not that I did any form of marketing). But I guess because we grew up in the area and we had known so many people that that sort of led them to try it out. And truth be told, there was never any advertising budget, it was pretty much word of mouth from the onset. Right from when we started. And it just grew from there. It really did, you know.

Italian Canadian Foodways 6:11

Did you guys have an original mission statement? Or an original vision you wanted for the restaurant? Has it changed?

Mike Ricci 6:20

Stay alive and have enough to feed our family, that was it. Yeah. So survival. You know, by the time, I guess it was probably about four or five years after we opened up, we were older, then, of course, and then myself and my younger sister had gone on to university. But we were still working full time. Like, that's how ridiculous it was back then. We both were working seven days a week back then, all of us. And then we also went to university. And then for me, after the first two years, which were disasters, needless to say, I sort of kept on part-time and finished eventually. Laura [dealt with] sort of the same thing. But by the time we finished, which was, for me, like 1991. And there was nothing going on. Zero, no jobs. You know, I was making more money working at the pizzeria. So we were kicking around the idea of opening another location. And I started to entertain it for myself. And, yeah, one night, I was going to York [University] at the time. So I started hanging around with a lot of people who lived in the Woodbridge area. The story goes that one pub night, I went to go drop off a friend of mine, and made a wrong turn. And I ended up at the corner of Weston Road and Langston (that's where we're located). There was nothing there. There were no lights. There was just a building that was going up with steel guarders and it said Longo's Supermarket, coming soon. And now the only other job I've had in my life was working for Longo's. Myself and my older brother, I mean, they're from Malton. And everybody from Malton used to work there, pretty much at one time or another. And I figured, you know what, this is going to be the place. And sure enough, you know, there was a lot of concern, you know, "you're out of your mind! You're crazy! What are we gonna do over there? There's nobody there." But, you know, it was a real slam dunk. And here we are. In terms of semantics, and the way restaurants are run, when we started out with the other location, it was either fine dining or super casual, like McDonald's. Those were sort of the gold standards, or McDonald's style. Yeah. So because our, our initial restaurant was super successful for takeout, but the fine dining never had any legs to it. It got busy. It wasn't really busy. So in those days, you had a central kitchen, and then a wall running right down the middle. And so it would be like McDonald's with no seating, just sort of like a takeout sort of thing. And the other side, you'd sit down and eat with a waiter, you know? So anyways, we figured this time around, we would go all-in with the casual. So when we started out, like the original model was around an Italian version of McDonald's, believe it or not, we even used to have swivel seating. Remember the tables and chairs at McDonald's? Yeah, that was our original seating. The concept was what is now in fashion and they got acronyms on it now to what's called QSR, Quick Serve Restaurant. This is a whole industry now. That was 30 years ago, and doing this, you know, a place where you can still sit down and eat. But no servers, no tipping, the value to the customer. And we sort of, I guess, given the area, we sort of turned it up a couple of notches as we went. That McDonald's seating lasted three years maybe. Yeah, because our first expansion was [about] three after we opened. So when we got into the place, we put really nice tables and chairs. I mean, nice casual stuff, not the metal hard surfaces. Also the menu started to evolve in our work. We never had changed it from the beginning, we added

items, [but] we never really took anything away. But we added items, because they started to grow in popularity, you know, the above and beyond pizza and panzerotti which are our calling card, right? And then you know, and then sandwiches. So those were the sort of the three heads of the of the dragon: pizza, panzerotti, and the Italian sandwiches. But pasta and salads we sell just as many as the others these days, you know? Because you know, diets change. So that's sort of the way we evolved. And tweaking along every so often with every expansion and honing and that's sort of always been our play is that, you know, we didn't really have interest in opening up multiple locations. But 20 years ago, so between all of this, so 92...by 1996, we're not only doing the expansion here, but my oldest brother had been approached about making pizzas for mass consumption. Okay. Okay, so this is the 1990s. Or that's probably when he started looking at stuff and we bought a shrink wrap machine that we stuck in the back of our restaurant, and then just started making samples and honing and this is what we do in between dinners and lunches. And we took wind up taking some space, I believe in and around [19]95 or [19]96, a separate space to start this company. And that company is called Ricci Food Group of Canada. And today, we manufacture frozen pizzas for supermarkets across North America. So that's our sister company. We do labels for everybody from Walmart, to Loblaws to Metro. And then in the US: East Coast, Midwest, [etc].

Italian Canadian Foodways 13:52

So you started from just survival to expanding in every market?

Mike Ricci 13:59

Yeah, pretty much.

Italian Canadian Foodways 14:04

Wow, that makes my heart warm!

Italian Canadian Foodways 14:13

How has the pandemic changed the way your business operates? (Obviously, a lot).

Mike Ricci 14:22

It has, but in in a sense, on a positive note. I've never been one that had to be reminded how important staff is. We don't get here by not having amazing people. So when this hit, there was no resistance in shutting down to figure it out. Not because we weren't busy, but because of the safety of our staff, because they are like family. And again, if they're not here, we can't do this. You know, we service in and around, between in-store and out the door, probably about 10,000 people a week. You know, we have a staff of 60 people. So we started out at the end of March, when things really got started getting bad. We said, "why don't we close for a couple of weeks?" Well, two became five weeks. And, you know, with the intention of taking some time to understand what was happening, how to go about running a business successfully without, you know, without laying anybody off or anything like that. So you know, in terms of running the business, we're fortunate enough. We're fortunate enough to come back to 90%.

Italian Canadian Foodways 15:51

Oh, wow, that's great.

Mike Ricci 15:53

Much more expensive to run it. So right now, as opposed to, "okay, what is the future? What are we going to do?" Like, I have space next door that we got late in 2019. That was supposed to be our expansion but now we're stuck. Like you're asking, what's the difference? I don't know what to do with the space. I don't know which way we're going to trend. Okay, we're lucky that we're fast so that I can handle having a large storage room sitting there for us. But it's this that is what keeps me up at nighttime. Because I don't know, if you would have asked me, you know, a month or two before the pandemic, I already knew what was going on and

what we were going to do. And now I really don't know, especially with the government, you know, changing stances on what is allowed.

Italian Canadian Foodways 16:46

Yeah, very true. What is the future for your business? I guess it's pretty open right now.

Mike Ricci 16:53

You know, let me tell you something, we've been here for almost 30 years, and we've never been allowed by the City of Vaughan to have a patio. So because they sort of started allowing restaurants to serve in parking lots, I went out in last January and secured a tent. [I thought,] "you know what? I'm going to take advantage of this." So that was sort of the plan for summertime, to get people outside and have them dip their toes in the water, so to speak, to come back to eat. So two, I think a good restaurant drives your pickup, catering and delivery business, right? Because people at the end of the day, when something is built on strong foundation, rather than invented, or a cartoon, it's not gonna have the legs of business. And that's why I'm brand builder, I'm not a, "hey, let me build and sell." It's another strategy and it's not a criticism at all. That just led to my family's personality, quite frankly. And hence, it's, you put your name on a sign, it means something. You know, and maybe that's the edge? I don't know, right. But the last thing you want is for somebody to have ill feelings towards your brand or your name. And it's not a realistic way to live. But it gives you the edge. If you're asking what will propel somebody to success? It has to be that, right? Because you can win at home, you can knock it out of the park. But try to do that every day times a gazillion. So that's why people get mixed up in thinking that it's it's so easy to replicate. It's not because there's a fear of running a business too much like an accountant and sometimes waste. Waste should be an afterthought. Because if you're, if you're not going to consume the product that you're making, how can you possibly give it to somebody in their family?

Italian Canadian Foodways 19:29

So you would say your standards are obviously very high then. [Are you referencing] the quality of your ingredients?

Mike Ricci 19:37

Yeah, because there's an expectation, right? As fickle as business is and I'm sure everybody that you interview is gonna tell you the same thing. You're only as good as your last meal. However, whatever little leaney whatever little wiggle room you have is based on your reputation, right?

Italian Canadian Foodways 20:31

Yeah, hopefully with the pandemic more people will be more appreciative of that. Oh, no, you're frozen. You just froze...

Italian Canadian Foodways 20:46

[interview is cut off here]

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