



FLIPPING OUT
Luigi Petrella
tosses his lunch
at Pizzaiolo in
downtown Toronto.

Humble **Pi**

Pizzaiolo hopes to bring quality back to the pizza business, one slice at a time
BY ALISTAIR KYTE // PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARGARET MULLIGAN

Pizza, Italy's most basic offering, is also one of its most famous foods. Adopted by nations around the globe, this one-time peasant fare has roots in the ancient empires of Greece and Rome. About 2,500 years ago, it's rumoured that Persian soldiers used their shields to bake dough in the sun before dressing it with cheese and dates. But it wasn't until the 19th century that the modern-day pizzeria first appeared as a modest storefront in Naples, just the kind of place prominent in Luigi Petrella's heritage.

Founder of Toronto-based Pizzaiolo Gourmet Pizza, the 36-year-old Petrella is a third-generation pizza maker. In the 1940s his grandparents opened the first bakery in Montorio, in the Molise region of Italy. A tiny village on the banks of the Adriatic, Montorio was so small there wasn't a local bread maker. "My grandfather decided to open his own bakery," says Petrella. "They baked and delivered bread to everyone in town, running it for years."

Over lunch at the busy Dundas and McCaul location, steps from the Art Gallery of Ontario, it's evident Petrella loves talking about pizza. It's a part of who he is, and how he was raised. When his parents moved to Toronto in the '60s, they continued the family legacy by opening pizzerias of their own. Petrella's uncle would later launch the Gino's Pizza chain,

proving this clan might have tomato sauce running through their veins.

Although he originally sold industrial packaging, Petrella was destined to return to the pie-flipping fold. When a customer couldn't settle a bill, he took care of the debt unconventionally. "One day he just shows up with a huge pizza oven," says Petrella laughing. "I brought it home, lugged it into my basement and began to make my own pizza and bread. That's how it all started."

After operating a few restaurants he went out on his own, building his first Pizzaiolo in 2000. Seven years later he has eight units across the GTA, with three more slated for 2008, and up to four new stores each year after that.

That's no small feat — the pizza business is one of the most competitive sectors



QUICK HITS

Number of units: Eight, with three opening in 2007
Unit costs: \$200,000 to \$300,000 turnkey
Architect/designer: "I design the stores myself," says Petrella. "I'm very selective with locations."
Size: stores range from 1,500 sq. ft. to 3,300 sq. ft. (the latter, a larger operation known as Pizzaiolo Ristorante)
Average seating: The full-service restaurant has seating for 120. Average seating is around 40 at the mid-level stores.
Check average: \$5 for a slice and soda; \$25 to \$40 at Pizzaiolo Ristorante.
Total sales: approximately \$3 million gross revenue in 2006.

in foodservice. Visit the smallest town or largest city in Canada, and on its busiest street corner you'll find one or more pizza outlets. Product differentiation is essential to success, especially in a category where customers are so loyal. But Petrella believes during the late '90s a glut of sub-standard, assembly-line-style pies were giving pizza a bad name.

"A lot of people were comparing the pizza to cardboard," he says with indignation. "Some chains were compromising quality to make money. The concepts weren't good, and customers realized this. They craved something better."

Petrella's concept was simple — a throwback to his grandparents' humble bakery in Montorio — give pizza lovers quality ingredients and great service at reasonable prices, and they'll

come back for more. And they do. In 2006, his eight stores garnered sales of about \$3 million.

When he opened his first store on Queen and Bathurst, business was excellent right away, even though the downtown location he took over was dead for 20 years. Petrella attributes its immediate success to the philosophy, service, and the feel of the restaurants. "Pizzaiolo doesn't look like it was put together by a faceless corporation," he exclaims. "The pictures you see in our stores are real, just like our pizza."

He also eschews shortcuts that compromise customer satisfaction. "That's not what we're about," he says proudly. "We make quality pizza. We cut our pies by four and not six [for sale by the slice]." Pizzaiolo uses only peeled Roma tomatoes for its

sauce, quality flour for dough, nothing is canned or frozen. The cheese has no rennin, and cured meats and fresh vegetables are hand cut as well.

Why all the fuss? Because you can taste it. If veggie pies are your thing, the Spinotta blends extra virgin olive oil, mozzarella and ricotta, with spinach and herbed tomatoes. Want meat? The Godfather is a deep-dish pizza packed with real bacon, Italian sausage, dry cured pepperoni, mozzarella and famed Pizzaiolo sauce. And though it's more expensive than the competition — slices average around \$4 — business is booming.

About half the locations are licensed, with 80 per cent of business conducted on-site. But as name recognition grows, the delivery numbers will, too. To that end, an online ordering system has just been launched.

A licensor, not a franchisor, Petrella says the business is set up to make money for licensees. "The Pizzaiolo name is not yet well known, so I don't charge royalty fees or advertising fees. All the money operators make, they keep." In addition to an initial licensing fee of between \$200,000 and \$300,000 for a turnkey operation, he sells them the sauce and dough, and anything that says Pizzaiolo on it, such as posters and pizza boxes.

Petrella offers licensees three levels of pizzerias. Smaller units have takeout and delivery; medium-level stores seat 40 and offer takeout, delivery, coffee and alcohol, while full-service spots are called Pizzaiolo Ristorantes. "It's got everything," he says of the giant, new 120-seat eatery on the corner of John and Adelaide streets downtown. "There's an upscale menu serving gourmet

ON THE MENU

Pizza Sampler (small to mid-level)

Bianca: artichoke hearts, zucchini, garlic, feta, oregano, mozzarella and olive oil

Whole wheat carnivore: whole wheat crust, dry cured pepperoni, Italian sausage, mushrooms, mozzarella, and the famous Pizzaiolo sauce

Soprano: sopressata, sun-dried tomatoes, gorgonzola cheese, mozzarella, and the famous Pizzaiolo sauce

(each are \$19.35 for a large)

Entrées (Full-service)

Chilean Sea Bass: Broiled marinated filet of Chilean sea bass served with risotto and seasonal vegetables. **(\$28)**

Amaretto Stuffed Chicken Breast: Tender breast of chicken stuffed with artichoke hearts, sun-dried tomatoes, goat cheese and topped with an amaretto cream sauce served with potatoes and seasoned vegetables. **(\$18)**

pizza, pasta, meats, fish, you name it." Pizzaiolo also has a large catering operation.

For the future, Petrella plans to grow the brand over each segment and ultimately expand outside Toronto — but he's taking his time. He wants growth to be organic, admitting he'll eventually have to charge operators to establish a marketing budget and get the Pizzaiolo name out there. To accomplish that, he also knows he'll need help.

"I'm not a marketing director. I need to put together a team when we get big enough to support it. But only when the infrastructure is in place will I look into branching out. Then who knows how big it can grow?" □