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Armando's 50th Anniversary

Award-winning pizzeria celebrates milestone year

BY REBECCA WRIGHT

At age 26, Armando Gerardi had a dream of opening his own pizza business, and so he did—in a building on Walker Road with a small restaurant space in the front and tiny apartment on the back.

It was 1967 and Gerardi was running a one-man show; he served customers in his six-table dining room, answered the phone for takeout orders and cooked the pizzas in the kitchen. His wife, Antonia, would help him when she got home in the evenings from her day job as a beautician.

Fast-forward 50 years and that humble business is now part of the parking lot of one of the 12 locations their business became—a local legacy that many know and love—Armando's.

"It's been a lot of hard work," says Armando. "I didn't see it going this far."

Pride is what comes to mind when thinking about how Armando's has grown and expanded over the years, says Antonia.

"We were two young kids with no money, and I thought Armando was crazy for wanting to start a business," she recalls. "But now, it's everywhere, and it's a really beautiful thing. We're truly thankful to our customers for really supporting us over the years."

The pair lived in the attached apartment and raised their three children there. Antonia recalls her middle son, Andre, per-

fecting his pizza-making skills at age 12 alongside his dad in the kitchen, and declaring to his siblings at that young age that the business would one day be his.

And now it is—along with his business partner and brother-in-law, John Pizzo. While the two next-generation family members are the current owners of the business, original owners and founders Antonia and Armando are never far away and still often help run things.

"This business is our life," says Antonia. "It's nice to keep it in the family and pass it on to the next generation."

Antonia says their current Walker Road location was opened 11 years after they started the business.

"I cried when that little place closed because it was really nice, but we outgrew it—there just wasn't enough space," Antonia says.

And that was just the start. Pizzo opened the second corporate location with his wife Josie—Armando's daughter—in South Windsor in 1996. That was after he worked at the Walker Road location for four years—which is where he met his wife, who answered phones there.

As the business continued to grow and become more successful, Andre and Pizzo soon realized franchising was the best way to facilitate expansion across Essex County.

"For us to do that on our own would be virtually impossible. You need an owner at each site," says Pizzo, adding that their Tecumseh location was the first franchised store.

Currently, amongst the corporate and franchise stores, the Armando's brand employ's 400 full and part time employees.

Aside from delivery, catering is another



Antonia and Armando Gerardi started Armando's Pizza 50 years ago.

- Rebecca Wright

option for customers to order Armando's to share with others—whether it is for a special occasion, social gathering or business event of some sort.

"It's a big part of our business and it's one of the ways we've evolved over the years," says John, adding that they have very equipped facilities to streamline the catering process, like their new state-of-the-art commissary kitchen on Cabana Road.

Over the years, one of their secrets to success has been to stay true to their roots, says Andre, something he and Pizzo have continued from his parents' way of running things.

"His pizza has always been perfect," says Antonia about her husband's special recipe—something they've kept the same over the years. "We've never cheapened our product

and always use the best quality ingredients." Armando says he still continues to make his unique blend of spices for the business's sauces about once a month.

"Armando's has become synonymous with not only great pizza but also delicious wholesome food," says Andre, citing how the business has been using local Galati cheese for more than 40 years. "We've kept with them because it's important to us that it's 100 per cent pure milk cheese, not cut with soy or modified milk like many cheeses."

And while pizza has always been the draw, Armando's offers a full gourmet menu with many pasta and meat dishes. And they're continually looking to tap into current trends, which is why they offer gluten-free

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options and are looking to expand their menu to include vegan varieties as well.

"And we like to take it to the next level—so we're looking for the best of these new trends," says Andre. "Like take gluten free, for instance, we want it to be that you're eating it because it actually tastes really good, not just for the health benefits."

Andre and Pizzo—along with their head corporate pizza chef, Dean Litster and president of operations Larry Vallieres—are continually looking to evolve the brand and business. They attend

conventions regularly, whether it is to learn about a new pizza-making method or ingredient, or ways to improve the customer experience.

"We are continually experimenting and searching for new products, technology, even equipment to make us more efficient and provide a better experience for the customer," says Andre. "We are currently working on an iOS and Android app that our customers can place an order right from their smart phone."

Armando's is an award-winning business, and they have no plans to

slow down, say Pizzo and Andre. "Our awards include the People's Choice Award for Best Pizza and the Chamber of Commerce's Tourism and Hospitality Award, and

in an international pizza competition in Las Vegas with competitors from all the world, our pizza won 1st place in the 'traditional' category, and 3rd best pizza overall," says Andre.

Pizzo is proud that the next generation has already become involved in the family business—with his two teenage sons making pizzas at the Cabana Road location.

"And in the New Year, Armando's

is headed in an exciting new direction and tapping into a new market," Pizzo adds.

Andre says customers are the lifeblood of any business and they are grateful to have been fortunate enough to serve the Windsor and surrounding communities for all these years.

"Our business focus is all about the customer and we've always been about providing the highest quality of ingredients, at a fair price, with the best possible service. We don't skimp. It's that simple," says Andre. "These are values that my parents instilled from day one, and it's still our motto 50 years later."



Armando Gerardi appears in a Windsor Star ad from 1970.

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