

Pasta queen uses noodle to cook up success

BY ROGER VARLEY
Staff Writer

On the face of it, Elena Quistini likely should have gone out of business years ago.

The founder and president of Pasta Quistini admits for the first three to five years, she didn't have what is widely accepted as an essential prerequisite — a business plan.

"I started my fresh pasta shop to keep busy from 9 to 5," she said. "We never intended to be where we are today."

Where she and her partner and husband, Orlando, are is miles and years away from that pasta shop. Celebrating 25 years in business this year, Pasta Quistini is setting trends, carving out niche markets and exporting its products to the United States, Mexico and Hong Kong — and still selling to customers who walk in off the street, as well as grocery chains and restaurants.

And now, they have a business plan.

"We have had continuous growth over the last 25 years," Mrs. Quistini said. "That's how we mark our success. That and continuing quality products."

Numerous articles over the past 20-odd years have chronicled how the business started: how Mrs. Quistini developed in her kitchen a new style of pasta that her mother — diagnosed with diabetes — could eat and enjoy; how that led to the opening of a deli store where she gave away samples of her pasta products to customers; and how she and her husband eventually left the deli behind to concentrate on producing new and different forms of pasta and other products.

She is now known as the Pasta Queen.

Incredibly, Mrs. Quistini has developed her products, carved out her markets and fought the competition without any formal business training.



Elena Quistini, founder and president of Pasta Quistini, with husband Orlando inside their Vaughan production facility.

"I learned the hard way, one step at a time, one back-stab at a time," she said bluntly. "I learned in the school of hard knocks. Maybe we would have reached our goals faster if I'd had basic business training. Flying by the seat of your pants takes a little longer."

She thinks, however, business is more exciting the way she did it.

"I never know what's going to happen," she said. "If the business became boring or predictable, it might become less rewarding. This way, it's exciting to get up in the morning."

Mrs. Quistini does a lot of things differently. Although there is a presentation kitchen in the Pasta Quistini plant on Vaughan's Jevlan Drive, much of her research is carried out in

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Elena Quistini
Pasta Quistini

her Woodbridge home.

"That's where I do my nitty-gritty testing," she said. "It's my biggest research facility."

Her kitchen is where she produced the first flavoured pasta (smoked salmon) and pasta in different colours (spinach and tomato).

"Nobody was doing anything with mixed colour pasta but it took off like wildfire and now it's used worldwide," she said.

She admits, however, some ideas didn't fly.

"One that didn't work out was my peppercorn pasta," she said. "The peppercorns all dropped out and left little holes in the pasta."

From her experimentation came diversification.

"One of the main reasons for our success is we're constantly diversifying," Mrs. Quistini said, noting the company also produces sauces, prepared meals and other lines. "It's not just centre-of-the-plate pasta meals."

Sitting in her small, cramped office where a collection of cookbooks is arranged haphazardly on the bookshelf, Mrs. Quistini laughs easily as she discusses her business.

"My husband said he's met people who think I'm tough," she said.

"If people think I'm tough, I'm doing my job."



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