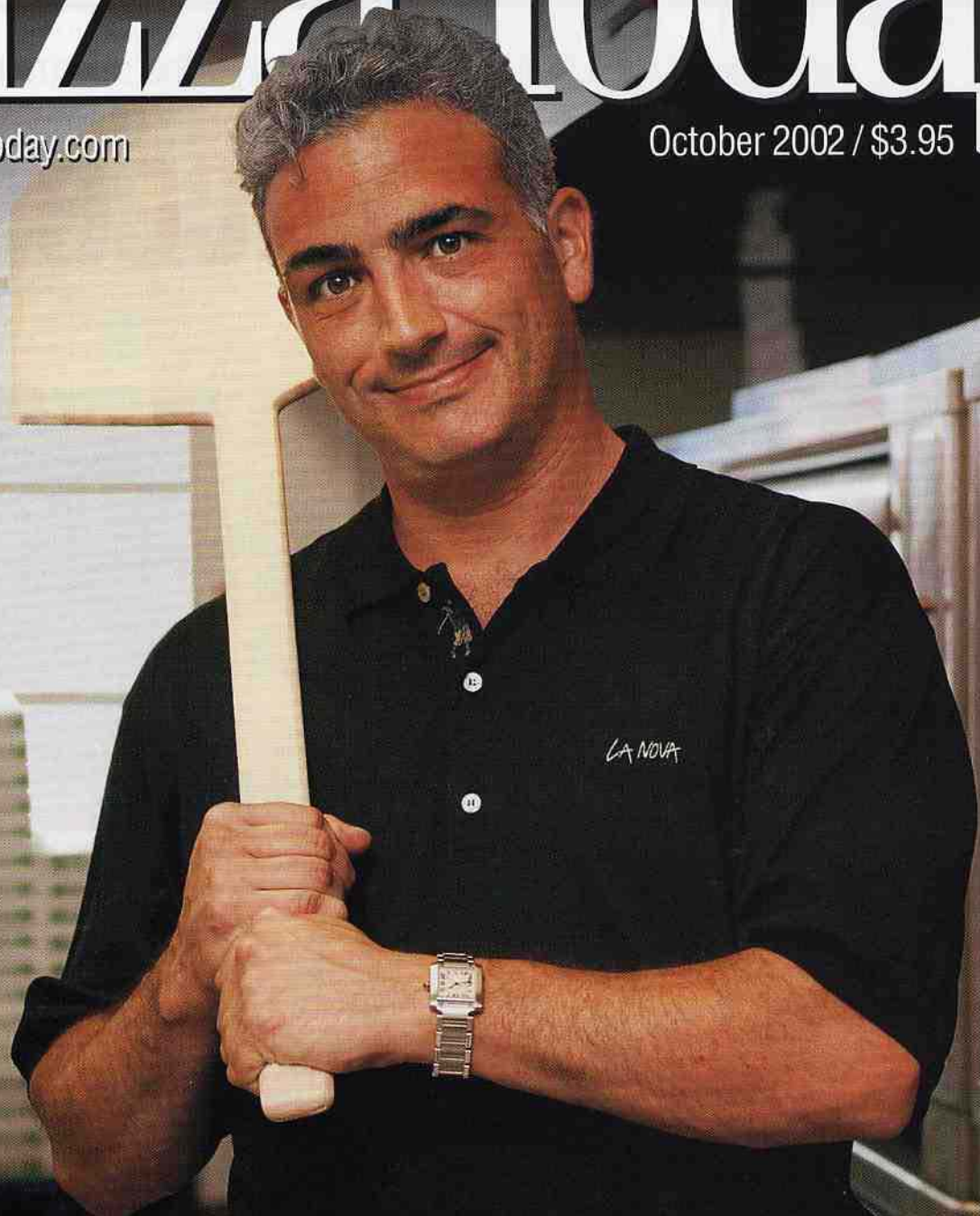


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Independent of the Year

La Nova Pizzeria — Buffalo, New York

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Independent of the Year

La Nova Pizzeria built business through the community

Models of Success

by Jeremy White



What do you do with an abandoned gas station in a depressed neighborhood? You turn it into the busiest pizzeria in America.

Yeah, whatever. Easier said than done. Maybe even impossible, right? Not exactly. In Buffalo, New York, the Todaro family managed to do just that. La Nova Pizzeria, founded in 1957 on West Ferry Street, in a neighborhood that now leaves a lot to be desired, manages such impressive numbers that the restaurant's books seem more fictional than factual to many. How can two restaurants — one with limited seating and the other a delivery-carryout operation just a year old — pull in over \$8 million annually? That's more money in one month than the average pizzeria makes in an entire year!

Somebody better wake Robert Ripley from the dead and tell him to find space in one of his Believe it or Not! museums, because La Nova's numbers, though unbelievably large, are for real.

Of course, the success didn't come easily. Every member of the Todaro clan

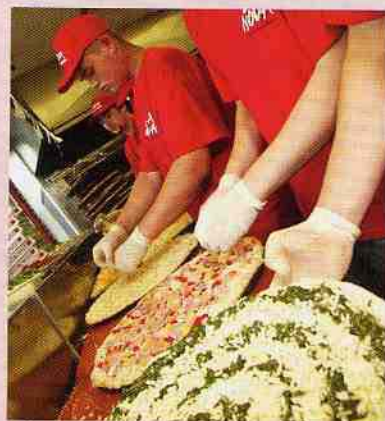


worked seven days a week to build La Nova into what it is today. In fact, even though they no longer need to go to work at all, family members still put in a grinding seven-day work week. Being there and watching everything from the dishwasher to the pizza cutter, they insist, is what makes the company tick.

"We believe we've got to watch the business," La Nova president Joey Todaro says. "We care about our business and we take pride in what we do. We know how easy it is to lose a business if you aren't watching it. We value it and that's why we

want to always be there."

Joey is the La Nova point man today, but he certainly doesn't do it alone. His father, Joe, founded the restaurant. It was through "Big Joe's" vision and dedication that La Nova became more than just another pizzeria. Joe's father, also named Joe, is an integral part of the operation as well. Even though no one would blame him if he spent his golden years elsewhere, "Papa Joe", like the rest of his family, reports to work every day to tinker with the sauce, build pizzas and chat with customers. Joey's mother, Cookie,



Menu At a Glance

Appetizers, \$1.95-\$6.45

Garlic bread, spinach bread with garlic and mozzarella cheese, Jalapeno poppers, fried Buffalo wings.

Pizzas, \$7.80-\$30.70

Steak and Dandelion — five cheeses, mushrooms, onions, hot or sweet peppers and dandelions.

Chicken Cacciatore — whole tomatoes, hot peppers, chicken and 100 percent pure mozzarella cheese.

Bacon Cheeseburger — fresh tomato sauce with a blend of mozzarella and cheddar cheeses, topped with ground beef and bacon.

Senor L.J.'s Taco Pizza — a Mexican-style pizza topped with lettuce, tomatoes, black olives, sour cream, taco meat, cheddar cheese and jalapeno peppers.

Toppings — almonds, anchovies, black olives, capicola, cherries, cherry peppers, dandelions, eggplant, fresh onions, green olives, ground beef, ham, hot peppers, Italian sausage, jalapeno peppers, mushrooms, pineapple, pepperoni, salami, spinach, sweet peppers.

Salads, \$4.20-\$8.60

Tuna salad, chef salad with French, Italian or Blue Cheese dressings, Antipasto, Greek salad with chicken.



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younger sister, Carla, and her husband, Sam Pantano, round out the daily crew.

"It's important to have the whole family there," says Joey. "It's a family business. It's been great, working with your family every day. I wouldn't have it any other way."

The La Nova Experience

When most pizzerias are busy, the tables are full and a small line forms at the counter. For some, the line even stretches outside. For La Nova, the line goes outside even on a slow day: you know, a day that generates sales below \$20,000.

"This isn't a busy day," Joey claims as scores of customers bustled in and out of La Nova's original location during *Pizza Today's* recent trip to Buffalo. "Usually it's crazy. This is slow."

For many pizzerias, that "slow" period would have had shift managers calling for reinforcements. No need for that here: La Nova is ready for any number of customers Buffalo can throw at it. Between the two stores, La Nova employs a total of 200 workers.

"We don't lose many employees," Joey says, "because we treat them well. We pay them well and we take care of them."

As if Big Joe's good-natured razzing and Papa Joe's smiles and handshakes aren't enough, crew members also are treated to a generous 15-percent retirement plan. While the stock market has hit the plans hard in recent times, Joey says the benefit is something his employees appreciate because they know other pizzerias will not offer similar options.

"It's a way to keep them loyal," he explains.

Customer loyalty, an issue for many restaurants, is another problem La Nova simply doesn't have. In fact, walk down practically any street in Buffalo and you'll probably spot someone wearing a La Nova T-shirt.

"These are huge," Joey says of the marketing tool. "We hand them out everywhere. We get out as many as we can. They aren't expensive for us, so we give them away. It's worth it. Everywhere you



Key La Nova members, from left to right, include Sam Pantano, Joey Todaro, "Papa Joe" Todaro, "Big Joe" Todaro and Carla Pantano. The two pizzerias gross \$8 million annually.

go you see a La Nova T-shirt. You even see them on road crews. Around here, the road crews can only wear orange, so we had orange ones made and we'll go down the highway and throw them out to them."

Ingrained in the Community

T-shirt giveaways aren't the only ways La Nova makes a name for itself in Buffalo. The Todaros believe strongly in community involvement. They make generous donations to the local Children's Hospital as well as a host of other charities. Perhaps their biggest community commitment, however, comes every March, on St. Joseph's Day. This traditional Catholic holiday, on which meatless meals are provided to the poor, has become an event of mammoth proportions at La Nova. On that day, the Todaro family feeds more than 4,000 people free of charge. In fact, tables are added outside to help handle the non-stop flow.

"It's huge," Papa Joe says. "Thousands of people in here, eating our food, free. It's a really special day, something we're very proud to be a part of."

Those who can afford it make donations for the food. Those donations, in turn, are awarded to the Children's Hospital.

"It's really amazing," Joey says. "We look forward to this day every year. It's a lot of work — you wouldn't believe how many people and how much time goes into it — but it's worth it. A lot of people, including us, look forward to it."

You don't have to visit La Nova on St. Joseph's Day to see the love affair the pizza company has with its customers, however. The relationship is fostered daily with smiles, handshakes and hugs. The Todaros show genuine interest in their patrons. They know many by name. They ask about their lives, their families, their work.

"A lot of businesses in general don't do that," says Joey. "What's it hurt to be nice, to smile and thank customers for their business? It doesn't cost anything. We value our customers. We know they have a choice in where they go and we want to thank them for coming here instead of going someplace else. It's common sense." ❧

Jeremy White is executive editor at *Pizza Today*.