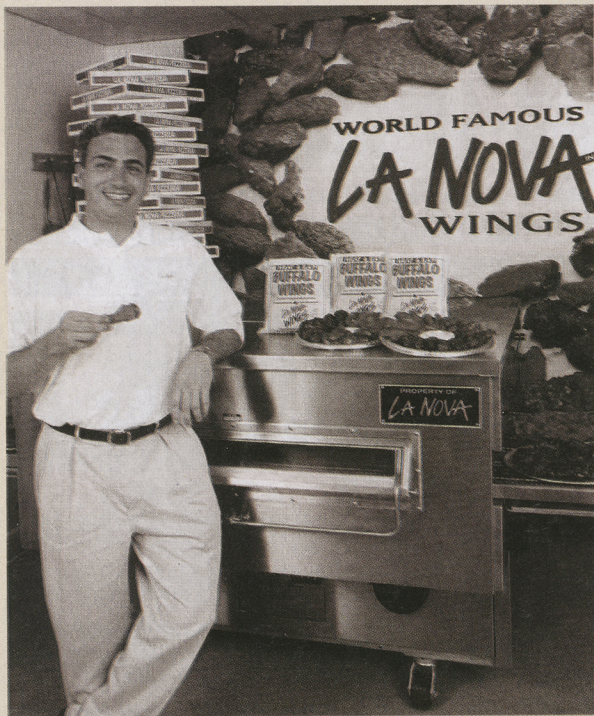
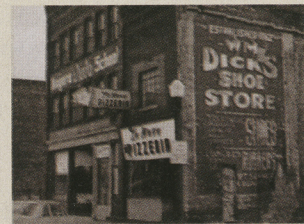




(Clockwise from top left) Joey III showcases La Nova Wings' chicken wings in 2002; (front row, left to right) Joey III, Big Joe, Carla and founder Papa Joe celebrate their booming business in 1998; the original La Nova was built in Tonawanda, New York, a Buffalo suburb, in 1957; (left to right) Big Joe, Papa Joe and Joey III man the pizzeria in the mid-1980s; (left to right) Cookie (Big Joe's wife), Joey III, Papa Joe, Big Joe and Carla show off branded pizza boxes in 1993.

PMQ PIZZA HALL OF FAME

BY TRACY MORIN



La Nova Pizzeria

The opening of the now-legendary La Nova Pizzeria in Buffalo, New York, may have spawned from an off-the-cuff idea, but the execution of this business—now with two locations and a chicken-wing empire—has been nothing short of painstaking. “My father was a carpenter by trade, and his friend said, ‘There’s a new business doing very well, the pizza business,’” recounts Big Joe Todaro, son of founder Papa Joe Todaro. “They opened a small place in 1957. I was twelve years old, and my mother helped in the kitchen.”

Local “urban renewal” projects shuttered the pizzeria after a decade, but Big Joe jumped back in the pizza game a few years later. He spotted an empty corner store in North Buffalo that could host the second iteration of La Nova Pizzeria, opened in 1971. This location introduced wildly popular barbecue chicken wings, helping it become the country’s No. 1 independent pizzeria by 1994. That year, wings ushered in a second arm of the business when the family noted that other U.S. pizzerias weren’t yet taking advantage of this must-have side order. “We realized wings would take off,” says Joey, son of Big Joe. “We introduced wings to the pizza industry.”

But even while growing La Nova Wings, their still-thriving wing and sauce business, the Todaros never lost focus on their pizzerias, showing off mind-boggling sales numbers and savvy marketing skills. By the time La Nova Pizzeria graced the cover of PMQ in 1998, it was raking in \$100,000 per week, with the family known for year-end champagne-bottle giveaways, branded T-shirts and pizza boxes, and robust off-premise sales. In 2013, La Nova further cemented its local legacy by becoming the official pizza of the Buffalo Bills.

Today, the third and fourth generations of Todaros remain at the helm: Joey and his kids—Joey IV, Dante, Toriana and Giorgio—as well as Joey’s sister, Carla Pantano, her husband, Sam, and their kids, Jenna and Vincent. But old-fashioned hard work and the unflagging dedication of numerous family members are two things that have never changed at La Nova. “My grandfather and father saw we had a good thing and worked seven days a week,” Joey says. “We valued what we built and never wanted to lose what we had. That’s our life—we love this business. We’re pizza makers at heart.”

Tracy Morin is PMQ’s associate editor.