

(201)

THE BEST OF BERGEN

Saucy Success

Glen Rock's Rochelle Randazzo turns passion for fresh pasta and pizza sauce into budding business



BY PAM WYNE

Photos by Anne-Marie Caruso

From the big leagues to the big chains. From sports to sauce. That's how Rochelle Randazzo succinctly sums up a career in which she began as an assistant to the big boss, George Steinbrenner of the New York Yankees, before winding up the creator and owner of Randazzo's, a best-selling line of fresh-made pasta sauces.

"I didn't seek the sports world," says Randazzo, a Long Island native who, with her husband, Kirk, and their two young sons, has called Glen Rock home since 2000. "It found me."

What Randazzo didn't know at the time was that she would hone sales and marketing skills that would propel her to dive into the competitive entrepreneurial pool of owning a small business.

After graduating from Hofstra University, she landed a job with America's Cup sailing team, which led to a position with the Yankees, first as an assistant to Steinbrenner then later as a manager in the marketing department.

"It was a great experience," Randazzo says of her career with the major league organization. "I also met my husband there, who happened to be working as director of operations, so it was a win-win."

Eventually the couple married, moved to the suburbs and started a family. Randazzo decided to stay at home with her young sons, but she wanted a part-time job to keep her skills sharp and her hands in the pot.

"Sales jobs, especially part-time, were really hard to find," she says of her search in 2008, "so I thought about what I could do from home that I could get excited about."

It all boiled down to cooking pasta sauce. "I grew up in the traditional Italian-American family, where cooking homemade sauce is expected," Randazzo says. "I learned from the best – my mom – and over the years tweaked her recipes to create pasta sauces that are made with fresh local ingredients, no preservatives or added sugar and sodium. I call it a farm-to-table approach when I make sauce. I use the best quality

FRESH AND FLAVORFUL Whether it's for penne, pizza or fettucine, Randazzo has just the right sauce.

ingredients available. A good sauce should leave you wanting more. You should taste the fresh ingredients in every bite."

Needing to form a fan base for her sauces, Randazzo created what she calls a "sauce club" and named her venture Randazzo's Honest to Goodness Sauces. She hosted a tasting party for family, friends and neighbors, and the response and feedback were amazing. Within days, the club had 60 members, who signed up to receive three sauces per month delivered right to their doorstep.

"I rented space at a commercial kitchen in Fair Lawn and would cook the sauces on Monday and then deliver at the end of the week," Randazzo says of the early days of her new business, which had her making her specialty sauces – vodka, plum tomato, alfredo, puttanesca and white clam. "It was go-go all the time, but I loved the whole process. It was like having another child – you have to be so hands-on when it is your own company. Success or failure – the decisions are yours to make. I also knew that I needed to grow the business in order for the sauce line to be truly successful."

Opportunity knocked. Randazzo's sauces won a taste test with a major natural foods market, which landed her a lucrative private label. At the same time, she literally got out of the kitchen and began a collaboration with Kettle Cuisine, a soup and sauce manufacturer in Boston that now handles the daily making and packaging of her sauces.

"The recipes are strictly adhered to and preserved," she says, "and the sauces are still cooked in small batches to best utilize the fresh ingredients. I am still very hands-on. But in order to go retail on a big scale, you have to have the ability to produce on that same scale."

Randazzo's can be found in Costco, in ShopRite stores in the northeastern U.S., in D'Agostino Supermarkets, and in Glen Rock's mom and pop store, Kilroy's Wonder Market. Always looking for venues to grow



SALES SAVVY Randazzo uses her business experience to promote her line of sauces.

her business, Randazzo can be found at many of the Bergen markets hosting in-store samplings of the sauces.

"I really enjoy talking with customers," she says, "especially those who might not have ever had my sauces. It is fun to introduce them to the line."

Not one to rest on her laurels, Randazzo has plans to create a brand of pesto sauces and to expand the existing line into food market chains in other regions of the country. She is currently courting the Publix supermarket chain, which is based in Florida and has supermarkets throughout the South.

"The food business, like any other, is really hard to break into," Randazzo says. "It is a challenge, but I just keep going after it."

Not one to shy away from playing in the big leagues, Randazzo knows that it takes time and determination to build a winning team.

"I have the time," she says. "I have the will to succeed and I have the best sauce. Honest to goodness." ■