

Mozzarella AND Memories

By Dave Holton

Why do we love pizza? Is it the dough? The sauce? The cheese or our choice of toppings? There's something more, isn't there? Something that goes deeper than the toppings and cheeses and crusts. And the owners of Tomato Patch Pizzeria and Bar in Corolla seem to know exactly what that something is.



Owners Linda & Lambros Vlahos

"On our honeymoon," says Linda Vlahos, "we went to Boston, and we got a pizza with garlic, pepperoni, and ricotta cheese." She laughs. "I can't remember the car we rented or where we stayed, but I remember that pizza." "Garlic, pepperoni, ricotta," agrees Lambros, grinning. "That was it."

Three decades later, they still remember. Lambros Vlahos doesn't wax poetic like Linda. "You won't get much out of me," he says. But he does have a bit of poetry in him when it comes to pizza. "Pizza is like music," says Lambros. "It has memories attached to it." And Linda knows how to get him going. "Just ask him about his pet peeve." She laughs, ready for the reaction she knows this will provoke from a man who holds his heritage close to his heart.

Lambros crosses his arms over his chest,

his muscles flexing. "We make Greek pizza," he says. "Greek. Many New Yorkers come here thinking that if it isn't New York-style pizza, it isn't pizza." Linda laughs again. "Don't get us wrong," she says. "We love all pizza. When we go to New York, we get New York-style pizza. And we love it. But it's not our pizza. Not the pizza we make."

"Greek pizza is crunchy, not chewy," says Lambros. "And the toppings go all the way to the outside." As he speaks, his hands play out the act of creation – kneading the dough, spreading the sauce, applying the toppings – and his eyes focus with the intensity of something felt. Something remembered. To Lambros, Greek pizza is more than just another style of pizza. To Lambros, Greek pizza is family. Greek pizza is a legacy. Greek pizza is the foundation on which he and Linda have built their lives.

Like so many of this country's entrepreneurs, Lambros was not made in America. At 8 years old, Lambros immigrated to the Outer Banks with his family. Back in 1974, when the turmoil between Greece and Tur-

key was happening, America had a more open-door policy on refugees. "The whole family got green cards," Lambros says. "I guess that wouldn't happen these days." Lambros grew up working for his uncle at Van's Pizza and then for his father at Kitty Hawk Pizza.

When Linda joined the family, she also joined the family business. After the couple had secured a loan from Currituck Bank – something they are thankful for, or as Lambros puts it, "who finances a kid out of college?" – Linda and Lambros built Tomato Patch Pizzeria in Corolla and

opened in May 1993. They served recipes passed down by Lambros' father. And the menu has grown with the restaurant. Now, in addition to

pizza, customers can enjoy Gyros, Buffalo Chicken Wraps, Greek Salad, Corolla Seafood Pasta and even Linda's delicious crab cakes. Or there's that drink at the full-service bar.

And in keeping with the Vlahos tradition, Lambros and Linda still blend work and family within the walls of the Tomato Patch Pizzeria. "Most of my family members have now worked here at some point and so have our kids," says Linda. "We have three boys, ages 22, 18 and 16, and they have all worked here, starting with bussing and dishwashing." She laughs, "They either learned that they hate it or they learned

"Pizza is like music. It has memories attached to it."



Every Tuesday is "Kids Day"



they love it. Now our middle son, Yanni, is going to Johnson and Wales culinary school in Rhode Island. With regards to the other two sons... "At least they learned Greek cuisine," says Lambros.

Since the Vlahos way is to treat family like employees, it's no surprise that the reverse is also true. "Working in a pizza restaurant isn't a career for most people," explains Linda. "Most of our workers are college-aged. Many are on J-1 visas. It can be tough because you are always training new people. But it's a fun, eclectic group. We have Romanian kids, Polish kids. And over the years, people have returned, sent relatives. We've had whole families work for us."

"Twenty-five years is a long time. Some of our employees who met here have ended up married with kids and businesses of their own in other places," says Lambros, smiling. He seems especially fond of their entrepreneurial employees. "They see a life here that they can't obtain in their own country, so they work hard, start their own businesses."

"We had one young man who told us he wanted to manage," says Linda, "so we sent him to ECU bartending school. Now, he owns Basil's restaurant in Greenville, a place that we originally built and then sold to him outright."

One of their current entrepreneurs in the making is Elena Rotari, who originally came from Moldova. She has been waiting and managing at Tomato Patch for five years now. "I've been attending COA for business, and I'd love to open my own restaurant. Lambros has been helping me develop my plan, and he even helped me with questions I should ask when I negotiate for the location."

And, like any good parents, they do more than just advise their young employees. "We are like a family," says Elena.

"One Thanksgiving, we cooked a sweet potato casserole for the European kids," Lambros laughs, "They didn't know what it was, but they loved it."

"And we do a whole seafood party during the summer since most of these kids can't usually afford to go out and eat seafood around here. We want to make

sure they get an experience," says Linda.

Though their own children are now grown, Linda and Lambros regularly fill their lives with the laughter of childhood – every Tuesday, the restaurant hosts a Kids Day. Elena describes the event. "It's a crazy day, kids everywhere, like a big party. They get chef hats and make little pizzas, and after they finish, we take the pizza back and cook it for them. It's so much fun." "We've been doing the Kids Day for 10 years now," says Lambros.

"Has it really been 10 years?" asks Linda.

Lambros laughs. "Years go by so fast. We judge a year by the end of the busy season, so it feels like a year is only a few months and then it's over and we're getting ready for next year."

Maybe that's why this couple can speak about their shared pizza nearly three decades later as though they just took their first bite together. Or maybe it's because it's not just about the dough and the sauce and the cheese and the toppings. Maybe it's about the hard work surrounded by family. Maybe it's about the many people who have come and gone and the experiences they've shared with employees and customers and each other. Maybe it's about the journey they've taken from there to here, then to now.

Or maybe it really is just about the pizza. "Hey. We love pizza, man," says Lambros. "That's it."



803 Albacore Street, Corolla • (252) 453-4500 • obxpizza.com