



Story by Jeremy White Photos by Josh Keown

EVOLUTION

How Mitch Rotolo, Jr. became our newest Young Entrepreneur of the Year



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itch Rotolo, Jr. grew up inside a pizzeria — literally. He recalls long nights of doing homework inside one of his father's restaurants, often enlisting the tutoring help of a high school or college waitress who worked for Rotolo's Pizzeria. He recalls taking naps on a bag of flour or putting in hours of work (he folded pizza boxes for a penny per

box) while other kids his age were playing pickup basketball on the playground.

"We moved from New Orleans to Baton Rouge," Rotolo, Jr. recalls, "when I was young. My father was looking at a piece of equipment for sale — I think it was a mixer — and decided the place had everything he needed and to just stay in Baton

Rouge and set up shop here. So that's what he did. Next thing you know we're living here and operating a business here."

The elder Rotolo spent time working for Domino's Pizza before venturing out on his own. He opened Rotolo's Pizzeria in 1996 with little money and has steadily grown the multi-unit pizza chain ever since. The company has more than 30 stores in four states (Louisiana, Alabama, Texas and Florida).

It only seems natural that Rotolo, Jr. would one day become involved in his father's enterprise. But when that time came, there was a bit of a surprise.

"My dad told me that he wanted me involved, but that I would never get past being a store manager for him if I didn't go to college," Rotolo, Jr. recalls. "He didn't want me to simply step into a leadership role. Even though I'd done every job from cleaning bathrooms and floors to dishes ... you name it ... he wanted me to go on and get an education. He wanted me to make sure this is what I really wanted, but he also wanted me to learn business formally."

So that's what Rotolo, Jr. did. He went to school, got a degree and entered the workforce with a desire to help his father grow his business regionally.

But something happened along the way. There was a sea change taking place in the pizza world and Rotolo, Jr. sensed the coming onslaught and

wanted to ride the wave. His perceptiveness and desire to evolve led him first to International Pizza Expo and then to a variety of influential contacts. Ultimately, a new identity that mirrors the wave of the future was born — Rotolo's Craft & Crust. That's where Rotolo Jr.'s story ultimately begins, and that's where our 2019 Young Entrepreneur of the Year award comes in. This youthful but

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experienced pizza maker-cum-businessman wowed the crowd of attendee-voters at last year's Pizza Expo with his concept, and it's easy to see why as you'll soon find out.

"NOTHING AGAINST WHAT WE WERE DOING AT ROTOLO'S PIZZERIA, because it's great, but I could see that there was something bigger out there waiting for us," Rotolo, Jr. explains. "We were making

great pizza with great ingredients, but doing it in a basic way for consistency and for the ability to duplicate it over multiple locations. There were times that maybe we could make a change that might improve a product or up the menu, but you don't want to change a product that people grew up on and that they love. That's a very dangerous thing. So I'd see the rise in certain artisan ingredients, cured meats

and other items like that, but it wasn't really something we could work in at Rotolo's without changing what our customers already loved."

When Rotolo, Jr. attended his first International Pizza Expo in Las Vegas he was struck by the passion of the industry, as so many first-time Expo visitors are. He saw the flair of the World Pizza Games, the artistry and innovation of the International Pizza Challenge, the surfeit of new, high-end ingredients that made it easier for operators to elevate their menus. It was eye-opening, exciting and, perhaps, a bit scary.

"I could see the future rolling out right before me," he says. "You could see where things were going. I identified an amazing opportunity. But I also knew we would have to do something vastly different to pull it off. It would be too risky to overhaul our concept. So we'd have to create an entirely new brand."

And, with the blessing of his visionary father, that's exactly what the young Rotolo, Jr. did. He worked



with renowned pizza makers such as Tony Gemignani, attended workshops and seminars at Pizza Expo, traveled to Italy to learn more about products and processes and tapped the resources of local marketing experts. He ran point on the pet project, but his father's experience and wisdom were crucial from day one as well.

"We put a lot of thought into Craft & Crust," Rotolo, Jr. says. "Everything we did was painstakingly examined and re-examined. Was this the best way, or could we do it better? Was this the best ingredient, or was there something else out there? Should we use tap handles in the bar or keep it super simple and go with brass taps and let the beer menu do the talking? We looked at and sometimes argued over every single detail. It was that important that we get every facet of it right, or at least to the best of our ability. There are going to be mistakes and nothing is ever perfect, but we wanted it to be as good as we could get it."

THAT DRIVE AND PASSION IS A BIG PART OF CRAFT & CRUST'S SUCCESS. Currently there are five such units, four in Louisiana and one in Frisco, Texas. Each location has an upscale casual look with modern finishes, a unique bar and a dine-in menu that encourages customers to linger and unwind. "We want you to come here, hangout, drink and eat family share-style," Rotolo, Jr. says. "We want you to feel comfortable here, to feel at home. Food really drives people and brings them together. We want to be a part of that."

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At the Baton Rouge location, for instance, the bar is one of the key focal points and the area of which Rotolo, Jr. is perhaps most proud.

"It is made from a sunken cypress tree that's over 500 years old," Rotolo Jr. says. "And the entire bar is one tree. Cypress is really abundant in Louisiana and it was really important to us that our bar be made of cypress."

Each Craft & Crust location also features a "history wall" that highlights the company's heritage from 1996 (when Rotolo, Sr. launched his pizza company) to 2016 (when Rotolo, Jr. began transitioning to the Craft & Crust concept). The history wall displays articles on each brand as well as highlights Rotolo Jr.'s many wins from the World Pizza Games at International Pizza Expo in Las Vegas.

"It's just to show people where we've come from, who we are and where we're heading," Rotolo, Jr. says.

THE "CRAFT" IN THE CRAFT & CRUST NAME COMES FROM THE CRAFT BEER AND COCKTAIL COMPONENT.

A bar area has been crucial to the Rotolo's Pizzeria success from day one, but it has taken on an even bigger role in Craft & Crust insofar that it's a defining part of the brand.

"It's about the craft as much as it's about the crust," Rotolo, Jr. explains. "We have 40 draft beers on tap. Twenty of them rotate constantly. We really try to keep up with the trends and bring in beers that are unique and that you can't get everywhere and that have a lot of buzz about them. Our customers get excited when there's a new one on tap



that they've never tried before.

"We've also spent a lot of time on the craft cocktails. We've sourced the best ingredients we can to give them the best flavor and quality."

Craft & Crust represents an evolution, Rotolo, Jr. explains. "We really want this brand to be built on the new, the trendy; we want it to be built on what's hot."

In the kitchen, Craft & Crust utilizes Italian deck ovens and places an emphasis on high-end ingredients.

"We offer multiple different styles of pizza," Rotolo, Jr. says. "That's a really hot trend, and one that not everyone can pull off. It's not easy. But if you can master it you can really stand out. At Craft & Crust we offer New York-style, Chicago-style, Detroit-style. We like to change it up constantly and give people new ideas and flavors to try out."

While the menu has staples, a variety

of slices and limited time offerings allow Rotolo, Jr. to experiment with topping combinations and flavors that keep customers engaged.

"We aren't afraid of trial and error," he explains. "We'll mess around and give something a shot. Not everything is a winner. Not everything you produce is going to be loved by everyone. And that's okay. It would be really boring if everyone always loved everything you do. It's okay to try something new. If it goes over well, we'll do it again. If it doesn't, we'll write that down and know not to offer it again. You're always experimenting, always trying new things, always learning and taking notes of what works and what doesn't."

NOT LOST ON ROTOLO, JR. IS THAT HE WAS VOTED IN AS THE NEWEST "YOUNG ENTREPRENEUR OF THE YEAR" by his peers

at International Pizza Expo. The word 'entrepreneur' carries a lot of weight.

"It's not just about making pizza, it's about being business-minded and growing that business," he says. "We are actively looking to develop and grow this brand through franchising. We opened five stores in a year. That was tough. That kept us on our toes and came with its fair share of challenges. Every day brought a new challenge or obstacle, from permits to dealing with different city governments to figuring out what beers or menu items would do better in different markets. What goes over in Dallas and what goes over in Florida are different."

"We've learned a lot about being nimble and adapting. It can be very challenging, but it also can be very rewarding." ■

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