

AN ESSAY TO

ENTRE- PRENEURS

Our 2020 Young Entrepreneur of the Year offers some valuable musings to his peers

Words: Rocky Shanower
Photos: Agape Photography



Rocky with...



Why

pizza? I am a self-taught, first-generation restaurateur. I never attended a business

class, never went to culinary school, and have never had financial investors. I opened my first restaurant at 22 years old. If I hadn't found a creative outlet in pizza, I am certain I would be doing something similar in another field. I see opportunity and love the challenge of taking something that exists and improving on it. The beauty of pizza is that it appeals to nearly every person on earth. It has decent profit margins, and there are countless interpretations of it. The best pizza is subjective...so we can all work hard to become the BEST PIZZA for our own community.

My values include Service, Quality and Culture and embody the following:

1. Have a servant mentality, show gratitude to every customer, be authentic, make a real connection, encourage staff members to be their authentic selves and show your team members how much your customers mean to you, don't just say it. Be on a first name basis with everyone.

2. Tell the story behind your pizza – not just quality but the why...local partners can be your best allies. Mutual support, create one-of-a-kind products they can only get with you.

3. Creating a positive culture. Live your mission, truly care about your team members, be vulnerable, admit fault, sacrifice for each other and care about the long-term impact of your business. Leave things better than you found them, not just the environment, but your team members, customers and community. Invest in your people. The restaurant is our home. We are a family and we are serving our friends and family dinner every night. Treat people this way.

4. 'Do the right thing.' When you use this as your guidepost, it allows you to think about things in a selfless way in which almost always is the 'right thing'.

Service, Quality Product and Price are the three main focal points of building any business. These are all critical, however, to build a business that feels magical and makes people want to be a part of it, you need to look closer. Beyond those initial criteria comes making an emotional connection with your guest through energy, atmosphere and purpose. These are the invisibles in a business that makes it go from average to exceptional. A restaurant can have the most amazing food, but if they lack these other traits, people will not be drawn back. I believe strongly that the emotional connection you build with your guests and community far exceeds anything else you can do to become successful. I believe that to be a successful entrepreneur you cannot undervalue any one of these things. You must create a harmonious balance and focus on all of these characteristics of your business.

It has been said that good food in any restaurant is not optional. But, I see many businesses that only focus on creating a good product without spending any time thinking about everything else that goes into the guest experience. I like to look at my operation through the lens of our guests: How does it feel to come into our building, how am I being greeted, how comfortable is the environment, do I feel welcome, do I feel appreciated? When it comes to energy: Do I feel lucky to have a table, do people seem happy, do the team members seem to enjoy their work, does it lift my spirits; how about purpose; what does it mean to support this business; do they support their community; do they treat their team well; does the money I spend impact someone I care about; and does this business seem to care about only making a profit or being a part of the community in a larger way. When people (your guests and your team) know you care about their experience and happiness, they will care about your success and well-being.

There is a concept that I teach to every team member on day one: 'Our restaurant is our home'...this is one big dinner party in which we are inviting friends and family to come over for dinner. You cannot look at guests in

your restaurant as paying customers that you hope to make a profit on. You need to look at the guests in your restaurant as friends you are eager to serve and please. When you look at it this way, you never get frustrated about a re-fire or discount. You look at it as making their experience matter because you truly care about them. That mindset will translate into building a relationship of gratitude and trust where everyone benefits. When your team members see you treating people this way, they will act the same way. How the leader of an organization acts rubs off on the team, for better or worse. Building a culture of gratitude and respect for others will permeate throughout your team and help make it a good place for everyone involved. Developing this type of environment will make it a place people will want to be a part of!

The more I think about it, my life is like many others who are in this industry.

We came into the pizza business at a young age to earn some extra cash until the next thing in our lives. But then something happens... there is a magic force that takes control of you. The feeling of creating something from scratch that brings happiness to others; that feeling of camaraderie after a long Friday night when the team pulls together and finally clears out the ticket window; that feeling you get when you see all of your hard work starting to pay off; the feeling that there is no limit to what you can do, that the more you pour yourself into your business, the more returns it will yield. All of these reasons are why I am still in the pizza business after 17 years and nearly half of my life. Another reason I love serving pizza is that everyone has sentimental attachments to it from their childhood. It brings a sense of happiness and togetherness for people. As a neighborhood pizza joint, we get to be woven into the happy memories of all those kids that grow up eating our pie.

Our business has been a constant evolution from day one. As we started to see our hard work yielding results, we continued to reinvest in our business. I always look at the profits of our business as fuel for its growth, especially in

When the team at Pizza Today and Pizza Expo set out to find our 2020 Young Entrepreneur of the Year, scores for outstanding candidates from across the country came in. After reviewing submissions and four-minute videos, Rocky Shanower, co-owner of Park Street Pizza in Surgarcreek, Ohio, stood out on top. He is a visionary, trailblazer and enterprising restaurateur. Since opening Park Street in 2003, Rocky and his wife Courtney have set into motion, not only a restaurant, but a Philosophy of Pie that lives by its creed and commitment to its small Ohio community. Let's hear from Rocky in his own words.





the early days. I never looked at that money as ours... I wanted to use it as a competitive advantage to gain market share and do more for our customers. This meant improving the quality of our ingredients, remodeling our building, investing in our team members and giving back to our community.

Being charitable is easy when you view what you are giving back as a way to thank your community for supporting your business. The more we supported those in our community, the more they supported us.

I find it interesting when people want to try and classify our pizza into a specific style. In the early days, as we worked to develop, refine and constantly tweak our dough and sauce recipe. We never thought about what style of pizza we were creating. We were just a couple of self-taught pizza makers from small town Ohio tinkering around and finding our way. We used our own palates based

on what we liked to determine what we wanted in the finished product. Both Courtney and I came from blue collar families with parents that struggled to get ahead. We didn't inherit any expertise on running a restaurant or secret family recipes. It's amazing what can happen when you spend every day doing the same thing. You see subtle details that can help you identify how small changes to a recipe can impact the finished product. Over roughly the first 10 years in business we kept tweaking, learning and experimenting to finally come to the recipes that we use today, never being satisfied with "good enough". It's an evolution. It's never complete. There is always room to improve. Our pizza at Park Street doesn't fall into a particular style, but if I had to give it a name, I would affectionately call it a "neighborhood" style pizza — because it is a style that exists only in our neighborhood.

Our dough incorporates a small amount of our own sourdough starter, cold ferments for 24 hours, gets a second rise in the pan and is baked in a gas convection oven. It was developed in this way because these were the tools we originally had to work with. We shaped the process around achieving the desired final result, so our recipe is quite non-traditional. The result is a soft pillowy dough with a crispy edge that can stand up to heavy sauce and lots of toppings. It is dialed in to what our locals crave first and foremost, but we have found it has mass appeal to nearly everyone who comes from far and wide to try it.

One of the biggest compliments I can receive is hearing from someone who is not from our area that it's the best pizza they have ever had. That tells me it's not just a regional favorite, but something that could thrive in other markets as well. ■

PARTING THOUGHTS WITH ROCKY



2. Get as many people on your side as possible and create allies in the community;
3. Show people that you care about their success as well, not just your own;
4. Be generous, pay people what they are worth, and they will do the same;
5. Never burn bridges — this goes for employees, vendors, guests and other businesses.

4. Learn to delegate. What are you the best at? What yields the most from time spent? Delegate, but don't disconnect from your people or the process.

Identifying opportunities

1. Listen to your gut.
2. Does this scare me or excite me?
3. Being an entrepreneur is exciting because I realized early on that there is limitless potential for improvement and refinement. It can be a double-edged sword because there is no end and it can easily make your life become unbalanced.
4. Finding balance between family and business, you need to be careful to not fall into the trap of pouring every waking minute being

consumed by your business thinking that you are doing it for your family to one day wake up and realize that you sacrificed your families needs for that of the business.

5. Evaluate the market you are in. You never want to mimic or copy your competitor, but you need to be aware of what is currently available and how your product or service will stack up. You will know it's a good opportunity if you feel confident you can offer that community something better than what is currently being served. Common sense says, "if I can offer a better product or service than my competitors CONSISTENTLY, people will take note and support that."

I'd like to leave you with some points on effective collaboration, team building and exploring opportunities.

To succeed in the restaurant business, you need collaboration. You aren't on an island. Positive collaboration can be a powerful thing. For example:

The power of collaboration

1. Collaborate with farmers, local business owners and charitable organizations, etc.;

Building a team

1. Hiring practices, being intentional, hire before you need people;
2. Identify strengths in people, creating a path for growth so they are motivated to stick around;
3. Surround yourself with people who have strengths that you do not. Understand your own strengths