**DMC’s Urban Evolution Podcast – Pasquale Presa**

Bill Von Bank:

The Urban Evolution podcast is brought to you by Destination Medical Center, creating the global destination for health and wellness in Rochester, Minnesota, more at dmc.mn.

Pasquale Presa:

She goes, "Well, how about this? Where was your happiest place that you enjoyed working? Let's dig deep. What did you enjoy the most of your entire career?" I said, "Well, I got to tell you if I can do it all over, I would love to go behind the pizza counter and just talk to every person we met. I just loved it. We created memories. We talked over a slice of pizza." She goes, "Well, let's open up a pizza shop."

Bill Von Bank:

Welcome to Urban Evolution, a podcast about harnessing creativity and innovation to transform communities. I'm your host Bill Von Bank. As an Italian immigrant growing up in New York, Pasquale Presa and his family moved to America for a better life when he was a young boy, a passion for food led to a successful career in the hospitality industry and ultimately ownership of a namesake neighborhood pizzeria in Rochester, Minnesota. His booming business hit the realities of the COVID-19 pandemic, but supply chain issues at local grocery stores created a new opportunity for his business. I sat down with for a slice of pizza, on national pizza day to hear his story. Pasquale Presa, welcome to the Urban Evolution podcast.

Pasquale Presa:

Well, thank you so much, Bill and DMC. This is an honor to be here.

Bill Von Bank:

Pasquale share with us your journey as an Italian immigrant, moving to America, growing up in New York and now living in Rochester, Minnesota.

Pasquale Presa:

My family came to America in 1981. I'll never forget the time when we got the letter from the American embassy in Naples, that we were going to go and get our green card. So we all rented a van in 1980, and we got into the van in Italy, embody Italy, and traveled to Naples. And that was the start of our dream in America.

Bill Von Bank:

How old were you?

Pasquale Presa:

So I was six years old and didn't speak a word of English and I'll never forget. I thought I spoke English and I was running around the town saying like these little blue, blah, blah, blah. I thought that was English. And boy was, I surprised when I came here to learn English.

Bill Von Bank:

What brought you to America?

Pasquale Presa:

My parents wanted to come for a better life here. Living in a small town called Grumo Appula, in Bari Italy, were only about 6,000 people back then. And my dad, his sister lived in New York and he wanted to give an opportunity for his children to come to America and live the American dream. So we came here with nothing.

Bill Von Bank:

In 1981?

Pasquale Presa:

In June 1981.

Bill Von Bank:

And where did you live in New York?

Pasquale Presa:

Our first little time spent was in the Bronx, New York. And my mom and dad were like, "Whoa, we're not used to this." So we got to go to upstate New York, which we call Rocklin County about 20, 25 minutes out of the [inaudible 00:03:15] Rocklin County, that's where we grew up. So that's where we first started. And we lived with our aunt and uncle for the first couple of months. And then we rented a two bedroom apartment in Spring Valley, New York, Division Avenue, where it was just me and my three brothers in one bedroom with two twin beds put together. And I used to sleep in between the crack and my mom and dad in their bedroom.

Bill Von Bank:

What was it like in New York and then talk us through your journey in life, and then what brought you to Rochester, Minnesota?

Pasquale Presa:

When we came to America, we wanted to obviously live the American dream and work. So my brothers started a little masonry company where we're known to do masonry work and I'll never forget. We bought a little Datsun pickup truck and they started doing, little bit of sidewalks, little bit of stoops. And then before, the stonework in front of houses. My mom was a crossing guard and she would work a couple hours. So my mom would always cook for us all the time. And at the age of 11 for me was my first job when we all had to work. So we worked and we all pulled our money together in the family. My mom was the executive finance officer for the Presa family, where she made sure that she took care of all that little stuff. So it was great. It was a learning experience for us as a family.

Pasquale Presa:

So I attended elementary school in Spring Valley, New York, and that was our first ESL experience, English as a second language. And I started second grade and met a lot of people and met a lot of kids. And every year I would be moving to another school to transfer the ESL program to another school. So it was hard for me to stay close to friends because we were always trying to obviously be in the program to learn English. So my friends were kids from all over the world. You're talking about Cambodia, Vietnam, Poland, Haiti. There's times I remember different phrases we learned with all these kids that was our hobby.

Bill Von Bank:

A worldly view at a young age.

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. And it definitely taught me a lot of experience because as we went to middle school, my forte is not English and I just enjoy learning with visual. So as I started going to middle school, we moved, then we ended up buying a house, our first house in New City, New York. And I'll never forget, we were so excited. I started going to Felix Festa Junior High School in Nyack, New York, west Nyack. And it was just an amazing experience because now we go from a two bedroom apartment to a house and here I am learning. But I started working at that age, 11, 12 years old for a small family that owned pizza shops. The family came to America in the fifties. So Alphonso, which was the dad created the first pizza shop in Far Rockaway Queens when they came there.

Pasquale Presa:

So then the sons moved to Rockland County and the pizza shop called Posa Posa restaurant, which is a pizzeria and restaurant. And I owe my entire growth and experience and what I've learned to them because they brought me into cooking. My mom brought me into cooking. I'm the youngest of four boys. So it was just an interesting way to learn. With that, I ended up going to high school and I was one of the first students that created a work study program. So in ninth grade and 10th grade, I used to have my mom pick me up and take me to the pizza shop because the first four periods I would have to be in school and then I would go to work.

Pasquale Presa:

So we created this little program that people that wanted to go to both [inaudible 00:07:14] where they would learn technical skills, like being an electrician or plumber. I chose to go to work in a pizza shop in a restaurant. So I'll never forget. I was like 13, 14 years old, flipping pizzas up in the air and TKR cable company came and did a little video, I want to find that video, and it was just great. I mean, it started our career in the restaurant. I just enjoyed always being behind the counter, talking to people, meeting people and getting to know people.

Bill Von Bank:

So you had a love of food early in life?

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. And it started from obviously being in Italy. We own olive orchards, cherry trees, almond trees, hazelnut trees. And my dad grows all the produce back home. And we know the true sense of flavors, the freshness, the importance of it, the seasonality of it. So that stuck with me my entire career and especially being young, started working in the restaurants, understanding the quality of product.

Bill Von Bank:

So you now live in Rochester, Minnesota, you came here with your wife and children. When was that?

Pasquale Presa:

So we moved to Rochester, Minnesota in 2011. It was December and January where I was recruited to run the [inaudible 00:08:40] properties downtown. So we came here and revitalize the food and beverage program at the [inaudible 00:08:46] and we started working with a lot of mayo events. We were meeting a lot of event planners. And we started the entire revitalization of different foods, different stuff that I brought to the table, from my experience, working with Hyatt hotels, Starwood hotels, Westin, Sheratons, St. Regis, those are the brands I worked with.

Bill Von Bank:

So hospitality has been in your work experience all of your life?

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. My dream was to attend The Culinary Institute of America. And when I graduated high school in 1992, I was dating my girlfriend who's my wife. And I met her at the pizza shop. So she was 16 years old. I was 17 years old and it's been over 30 years that we've been together and have gone through this journey together. So my dream was to go to The Culinary Institute of America. I remember the first time I didn't get in, because I just did not enjoy math. I didn't enjoy reading, going to school. Again, going to ESL school throughout my entire schooling. The first time I didn't get in and I was heartbroken. And I remember telling Valerie and her brother, George, I says, "I need help. I really need help. I got to get into the school." And they used to practice with me at their kitchen table, how to do fractions and how to break down recipes from 16 ounces or 24 ounces, how many portions?

Pasquale Presa:

So I focused on it. Now it was a focus for what I really enjoy doing. And the second time around that I applied, I barely made it in and I needed to go meet with the dean of students. And this master chef [inaudible 00:10:36] was from Germany, short guy. I sat in his office and I said, "Chef, this is my dream. My parents came to America. I want to make it, I need your help. I promise you, I won't let you down." And he says, "You work hard, I'll be paying attention to you. I'll give you a chance." And here it is where I went to Culinary Institute of America it was my dream of learning so many different types of cuisines. And I had an opportunity to work around the world. So it was just memorable.

Pasquale Presa:

I remember an experience where I was working at the Culinary Institute of America at the alumni offices. And my roommate, Nick used to say, "Pasquale, you got to work there because we can get side jobs. So it could help pay for our tuition." I'm like, I know this is so expensive, so I paid my way through school. Back then we didn't have Google. We didn't have any internet in 1996 to figure out where do we ask for grants. So I used to go to the financial aid office and I asked to talk to the lady and say, "Listen, I need your help. How do I get grants?" She's like, "Here's a book of financial aid and look up all different types of companies or agencies. And you've got to write a letter." I'm like, "Okay." Well, guess what? I had my girlfriend at the time help me write a letter. And I used to send out letters to the Sons of Italy, Knights of Columbus, the Elk Clubs, all of these different places. And that helped me get through the tuition of the Culinary Institute of America.

Bill Von Bank:

Entrepreneurial right from the start.

Pasquale Presa:

Well, it was interesting because you would learn, right? So Nick would say to me, "Pasquale, you got to work at the alumni offices." I'm like, "Okay." So I go up there and this phone call changed my entire life. I got a phone call from the Grand Hyatt New York where the chef Tony Wall called and said, "Hey, I'm looking for an Italian speaking culinarian that would like to come and help. We have an Italian festival at the Hyatt. Can you recommend this?" I said, "Absolutely, sir. Give me your phone number and everything. I'll have someone call you right away." So I left the office, I went to my room and I called them like, "How are you doing? My name is Pasquale. I would love to come and help you. I heard you need some Italian speaking." He goes, "Yeah, can you speak Italian?"

Pasquale Presa:

So then I started talking to Italian and he goes, "Oh, great. Let me have you talk to [foreign language 00:12:47]." So [foreign language 00:12:49] is the chef from Latta, Verna in Italy. That when he and I met at the Grand Hyatt in New York, he said, Pasqua. He gave me this nickname, Pasqua. "Pasqua. I don't have kids. You are my son." And from that on, I did my internship in [inaudible 00:13:06] in Italy, at [inaudible 00:13:08]. I learned a lot of the Northern Italian cuisine. And he's been on my shoulder ever since anything that I need, I always call him and say, "What do you think [foreign language 00:13:15]? What do you think of this?" And he always steers me in the right direction. And that's where my career started with the Hyatt hotels. He knew the corporate chef and he said, "I have someone special for you."

Pasquale Presa:

This young kid is going to do phenomenal in the Italian experience, the Italian culinary. So my first job with Hyatt was at the Hyatt West Hollywood on sunset Boulevard. I was the youngest executive chef at 23 years old, going into the Hyatt on sunset. Little Richard lived on the third floor and he would call, "Hey, chef, I need some breakfast." You got it Mr. Little Richard, I take care of you right away. So we became friends. I have a beautiful CD signed by him. It's just experience. And then I get a phone call from the corporate chef saying, Pasquale, we need you to go to the Hyatt, Regency Kauai. I'm like, "Hyatt, Kauai. Where's that?" He goes, "Just look on the map where Kauai is Hawaii." I'm like, "Hawaii?" So my wife and I ended up moving to the Hyatt Regency Poipu Bay in Kauai. I mean, the experience was just phenomenal that I had. It's our journey that's taken us all over the world." And it's just incredible.

Bill Von Bank:

Bringing it back to Rochester, Minnesota now. You opened a pizzeria in 2016 [inaudible 00:14:31] called Pasquale's neighborhood pizzeria. Why did you start the business?

Pasquale Presa:

My wife and children were here while I was working at the Kalahari resort in Wisconsin Dells. And she was attending school to be a family therapist. I was living down there and commuting. And our business in the hospitality is always moving, always commuting, being away from family. So my wife said, "What are we going to do?" It's just crazy, the commute. I said, "I know, I don't know if I want to do this anymore." It's just a tough life. I mean, the grind in the kitchen and the hospitality is just rough. So I says, "I don't know." She goes, "Well, how about this? Where was your happiest place that you enjoyed working? Let's dig deep. What did you enjoy the most of your entire career?" I said, "Well, I got to tell you if I can do it all over, I would love to go behind the pizza counter and just talk to every person we met. I just loved it. We created memories. We talked over a slice of pizza." She goes, "Well, let's open up a pizza shop."

Pasquale Presa:

I was like, "I'm kind of worried, in Rochester, Minnesota?" She goes, "Pasquale, we will change the pizza concept and the pizza outlook in Rochester." I said, "All right." I said, "Let's put something together." And that's where I put a group of people together then we raised some money. And we opened up Pasquale's Neighborhood Pizzeria in November 18th on my birthday in 2016. And it's been probably the best thing I ever did in my entire life.

Bill Von Bank:

Was restaurant ownership, always the end goal for you?

Pasquale Presa:

It wasn't because I was always scared. I've seen Alphonso and his kids, John and Michael and Tony, what they go through. They would work seven days a week and they were away from their families. It was very scary for me to do it. And plus, when you own your own business, you have to wear multiple hats and understand a lot of it. So it wasn't, but I always had a sense of doing something, but I was just scared. I just never had the confidence to do it.

Bill Von Bank:

You opened your restaurant as a new economic development initiative called Destination Medical Center was getting started, right downtown Rochester, Minnesota. Was that a motivating factor for you?

Pasquale Presa:

Absolutely. Again, I'm not from Rochester. I grew up in New York and traveled all over the world. And when I started seeing this opportunity, I said, "We need to think 10, 15 years from now. We can't just think today." And this has been the most rewarding experience for me to associate myself with the number one brand. One, being Mayo clinic. Two, the med city of Rochester and three in the heart of downtown. It opened up my eyes to the amazing opportunities that it was going to bring me.

Bill Von Bank:

We've reached the one year mark of the Coronavirus affecting our lives. How has the pandemic effected your business?

Pasquale Presa:

Well, I got to tell you that was the scariest thing I ever went through. As we were understanding what this was all about last March and February, it was just scary, and I was like, "I hope it doesn't come here." Now, my family started experiencing it in Italy. So I was getting real updates. What was happening there? And that was the toughest time. So my brothers were scared. My mom and dad was scared. They're in a small town. And I said, "Man, I just hope it doesn't come here." And I was believing, "It'll never come here." Well, sure enough, it definitely has changed my outlook. And there was something within me that brought me back to my childhood, that I felt like, we can't lose hope. We got to move forward. We got to be cautious. We got to be ahead of the curve. We got to know every move we make will impact not only us, not only our staff, but our community.

Pasquale Presa:

So let's think not only in small, but big, what can we do? And it's changed our whole outlook in being a private entrepreneur and restaurant tour where we decided we had to close down our dining. I have 5,000 square feet. We pay a lot of money to be in that location. So the first phone call was to the owner of the building. And I said, "Mark, I'm going to need your help. I don't know what this is going to bring, but if there's something, can you please support me?" He says, "Pasquale, whatever you need I'm here." Okay, great. So the first couple of weeks I delayed the rent to him just to see where we were going in March and April.

Pasquale Presa:

And before you know it, as we expedited the takeout business, it was just like, this is going to be okay. We started being on track again with everything. So this is where my instincts coming from a small town, not having anything. Here, we want to make things too easy, right? So I would pay everything via bank like wire, everything was paid automatically. Well, I told our accounts person take everything off. We're going to write checks to the people that are going to help us through this. This has got to become community. This has got to become survival. How can we make sure we help each other? So we started obviously, paying the people that we had to pay that were going to help us. And before, you know it, two months into it, our takeout business grew and something happened that was just phenomenal. I was in touch with Hy-Vee. We were doing a promotion in February with Ciao Italia.

Bill Von Bank:

And Hy-Vee is grocery store chain?

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. Hy-Vee is a grocery chain throughout the Midwest. And so a gentleman by the name of Brett Peterson came up and said, "Hey, I need your help. We want to explore a little bit of the Italian. Can you come and help us at the supermarket? I'm down here, Hy-Vee South." I said, "Absolutely." So I went there and we bought some tomato sauce. We brought this line of fontanella tomatoes that I'm working with the family in Italy and started showcasing these tomatoes in Hy-Vee. And before you know it, we started bringing those tomatoes to the four Hy-Vee's and I used those tomatoes in our pizza. They're imported tomatoes, number one quality, a hundred percent grown and manufactured in Italy. So it's all about quality. So Brett says, "All right, help us out." So I went there, we did a little bit of presentation with our pizzas, our cheese and our sauce. And before you know it, March comes around and he's like, "Pasquale, we need to showcase your pizzas." I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He goes, "Listen, the supply chain, things are happening."

Bill Von Bank:

The coronavirus effected the supply chain.

Pasquale Presa:

Oh, automatically. I mean, from boxes, from paper, from product, you remember everyone didn't even have toilet paper, didn't have paper towels. So now it started affecting everything. So he says, "Pasquale, can you make frozen pizzas?" I said, "Well, I can make frozen pizzas. I never thought that I'd be selling frozen pizzas." He said, "Well, show me what you have." I said, "Okay." So I walk them in the back to my little freezer and he's like, "I'll take this right now." I said, "What are you talking about?" He's like, "I'll take it. Let's showcase this." I'm like, "Brett, what am I going to have? I need to be ready. I don't know what's happening. I don't have any sit-down restaurant. I'm only doing takeout." And he goes, "Pasquale, speed up the production. We want to feature you in our supermarket." I said, "Okay."

Bill Von Bank:

At this point, this was one supermarket in Rochester, Minnesota?

Pasquale Presa:

Yes. This was the Hy-Vee South where he said, we want to feature you there. So May 4th, we started our production with them and we delivered to them on May 4th, first store. And before you know it, Heather, who was the regional says, "Pasquale, we need you at Barlow's. When can you bring it?

Bill Von Bank:

A second store in Rochester?

Pasquale Presa:

A second Hy-Vee in Rochester. So Hy-Vee Barlow's. And I said, "Okay, well, give me two weeks." So I started making pizzas by hand. We were making fresh dough.

Bill Von Bank:

All in your restaurant?

Pasquale Presa:

All in our restaurant, our staff was busy. We're working, we're preserving people working with us. So before you know it, she says, "We need to go to the Hy-Vee 37th street in Rochester."

Bill Von Bank:

Third store?

Pasquale Presa:

Third store. I said, "Okay, give me a couple more weeks." So we ramped up the production and we're making dough and we're making these pizzas. And then that hits. She says, "Well, we got to go to West circle, drive the fourth store in Rochester." I said, "Okay. So all the Hy-Vee's in Rochester, Minnesota, we're selling our local pizza."

Bill Von Bank:

At the same time, you're still doing the normal routine every day. The takeout, curbside pickup, et cetera?

Pasquale Presa:

Absolutely. During our downfall of the hours between 1:30 to 2:30, we had to keep the production going. We had to keep it going. So that's where we were making the pizzas. When lunch wasn't as busy and the takeout was a busy. So down our slow times, we kept people working the whole time.

Bill Von Bank:

You're in four Hy-Vee's in Rochester, Minnesota, you're still keeping the lights on at the restaurant and keeping really busy with the takeout business that's really grown during the pandemic. What happened next?

Pasquale Presa:

Well, I realized I needed to expand our refrigeration, our freezer. So I took out a loan to put a 12 feet by 16 feet freezer in the back room where we used to do meetings. So now that was our hub. Then we had a little bit of a roadblock where the Department of Agriculture calls and says, "I need to meet the owner right away." So this gentleman by the name of David from the department of ag in Minnesota, meets me at the pizza shop. Nicest guy. It seemed like I was in trouble like when I was back in school that I didn't want to do my homework, but he sat down and looked at me in my eyes and he said, "Pasquale, I need to help you with something." He didn't say I was in trouble. He said, "I need to help you with something."

Pasquale Presa:

I said, "So who are you?" He says, "My name is David. I'm the Department of Agriculture from Minnesota and from the dairy and meat. It says you are servicing four Hy-Vee's in Rochester. You need to have an inspector here when you're processing meat. I'm like, "What are you talking about?" I says, "I was told we can do this." He goes, "I know you were told, I know there's been an issue with the supply chain. You have done phenomenal, but we need to be all in regulation." I said, "Okay. So what do we do?" He says, "I'm going to help you through the process. You need to get a HACCP plan." These are HACCP, which is hazardous analysis, critical control points on foods. So we don't get anybody sick. We need to make sure you have an inspector here. We need to make sure that things are a hundred percent.

Pasquale Presa:

I said, "Okay." Now my tears cut in rolling. I'm like, "I put so much money into this. I have employees." He held my hand and he said, "I promise you, we're going to get through this." It took us almost four weeks. We had our operation back up and running. So we had a pause for four weeks. We were continuing the process. We will continue to do... He says, "Pasquale, continue what you're doing. You're using all the cooked product. Everything is factual. We just need to put it on paper." So before you know it, we had the inspector every Monday, working with us, producing our pizzas. And now that the four supermarkets are back on track. Now Hy-Vee in Winona comes up.

Bill Von Bank:

Wynonna, Minnesota.

Pasquale Presa:

Wynonna, Minnesota. Hy-Vee in Owatonna, Minnesota comes up. Then Austin, Minnesota comes up and throughout all of this, me and my team are working on doing our own social media, our own marketing, where I would get there and say, Hello Wynonna, Minnesota, I'm here. I brought your pizzas, come on down and enjoy."

Bill Von Bank:

Because you're not shy.

Pasquale Presa:

Well, we can't be shy. We have to be truthful. And we have to be very transparent on what we do. And that's what I love to communicate. We are changing the frozen pizza world in this region because of the quality ingredients that we do. We use Grande cheese. That is the number one cheese on pizza. That's why our pizza tastes phenomenal. We use fontanelle tomatoes, imported product from Italy. I actually had to have a conference call with people from Grande cheese, because they said to me, "Pasquale, we have never brought that cheese on frozen. We don't do that." I said to the guy, "Russ, I don't care. I want the best. I want to represent my quality. I can't put different cheese on a frozen pizza. I can't put different pepperoni. Everything needs to be the same."

Bill Von Bank:

Just like you're in the restaurant.

Pasquale Presa:

Just like in the restaurant. And that's what we do. We [inaudible 00:27:43] our pizzas over 20, 30 times to make sure that it's very close, it's frozen, but you know what? You're tasting the same sauce. You're tasting the same pepperoni, fresher [inaudible 00:27:55], our imported olives. Everything is the same. So now things are growing. I mean, now I couldn't believe what's happening.

Bill Von Bank:

Do you have a count on how many pizzas you have sold?

Pasquale Presa:

I had to obviously keep track of this. To date, we have sold 57,414 pizzas.

Bill Von Bank:

Since what date?

Pasquale Presa:

Since May 4th, that is incredible.

Bill Von Bank:

At seven Hy-Vee stores in Southeast Minnesota.

Pasquale Presa:

Exactly. And now we've had the opportunity to span, to Lakeville, Minnesota. So just [crosstalk 00:28:38], yes, right near the cities, we wanted to penetrate the market up there. So I've been communicating with corporate Hy-Vee. There's a gentleman by the name of Tyler. And I said, "Tyler, what do I need to do?" He says, continue to go to different stores." So he guided me. And again comes back to me reaching for help when I was a young kid. If I need the help and the support, I raise my hand. So he says continue to get up there. So last week I decided to text him and said, "Tyler, when can you and I talk." He sends me his cell number and says, "Call me Friday." And I think that Friday of last week may have changed our entire life at Pasquale's Neighborhood Pizzeria.

Bill Von Bank:

Can you share details from that conversation?

Pasquale Presa:

So I spoke to Tyler on the phone and he said, "So tell me, what do you need?." I said, "Tyler, we want to be part of the Hy-Vee community, part of the Hy-Vee family. And we would love to showcase our pizzas. We are going to change the frozen pizza. As a culinarian, as a graduate of The Culinary Institute of America. We're not compromising quality. When you walk down your frozen aisle, you don't see fresh arugula, you don't see feta cheese. You don't see cut pepperoni. We're talking the top quality." He's like, "Pasquale, you're making me hungry." I said, "Well, what can we do? How can we show?"

Pasquale Presa:

So he's like, "Well, you know what?" He says, "Let me set something up via Zoom with our leaders of Hy-Vee purchasing and see when we can connect." I said, "Sounds great." And also, I know you guys have a private label of your tomato sauces and different types of sauce in containers and jars. We can create something that's amazing with Hy-Vee. We have direct connection with our family back in Italy that can bring fresh tomatoes. We can create your own line. You can cut out the broker. You can cut out the middle guy and we'll go straight to the company. He goes, "What do you mean?" So I discussed this with him and he goes, "Let me get back to you." Our conversation, lasts for 23 minutes about what we're doing with our pizzas. And I gave him all the numbers.

Pasquale Presa:

10 minutes later, he calls and says, "Pasquale, we'd like to set up a meeting with you. These are going to be the top people of Hy-Vee that make the decisions." I said, "Okay, I can't wait." Well, about an hour later, I get an email zoom meeting for this past Monday, yesterday to be able to meet at one o'clock and our world just started changing. So over the weekend, I couldn't sleep. All I was thinking about. We need to showcase what our love for food is our passion. And yesterday we set up our zoom meeting, I've never said before we had monitors and we had our pizzas ready and our sauces-

Bill Von Bank:

In your restaurant?

Pasquale Presa:

In our restaurant, we're closed on Monday. So we had an opportunity. I wanted to showcase the importance of our first impression. Our kitchen is spotless. We have an open kitchen. When you walk through, we greet every person, one by one, we want to talk to you. We want to engage with you. So they saw this whole setup. I had the pizzas right in front and boy, it was like something going through my body that we made these emotional connections with people in higher levels that were just engaged with what they saw. I mean, some of the great comments were like, "I love your passion. I love your energy. I love what you do. What is your goal? What do you want to do?" I says, "You know want? I want to be part of the Hy-Vee family. I want to bring something amazing to the frozen section. I want to bring something amazing with our sauces."

Pasquale Presa:

And sure enough, we're going to start working on some of these amazing products that we're going to bring with possibly 250 stores. When he says to me, Pasquale, can your production handle 250 stores? I said, "Yes, sir, because I did my homework." Our co-packer that is able to produce our product the same way, or I will not be doing business with him is ready to produce, our company that we can create different recipes is ready to produce. So that's the increasing relationship that we've created.

Bill Von Bank:

Fantastic. So you've got a growth strategy in mind that looks pretty big.

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. And a lot of people would say, "Hey, can you create a smart plan? Can you create bullet points?" I got to tell you, I've learned a lot of that through our corporate life in Starwood, hotels and Hyatt. I'm a green belt, six Sigma trained. So I understand processes, but for me, I like to emotionally connect with the top people of the company. If I got to spend time just talking to people that are going to pass me to the next email, the next email, the next email, it seems like time goes by. So I learned this expression from a chef that says, "The first bird gets the oyster. The second bird gets the shell." Well, you know what? I'm not going to get the shell. I want to take the oyster home.

Bill Von Bank:

You speak of authentic food and you create authentic food, but the word authentic also describes you. You're obviously full of life and compassion and drive. Where did this come from?

Pasquale Presa:

Well, I was born in Italy. I was always involved in food. We always had food around us. Our family is always helping others. My dad would make olive oil and give it to the priest. He would make olive oil and give it to the police station. Here's to the police chief. And it was all about giving and helping and being authentic. We love to share. Our community is about family. Our community, as an Italian is about giving. And it's just natural with us. When people ask me, "Why do you do it?" I don't understand how to answer that because that's what we're born with. We help our next door neighbors. My mom used to make bread. We used to give bread next door. People are like, "Well, what are you doing?" Oh, taste the bread. Tell me what you think. So that's what it's about. It's coming from within you as a person.

Bill Von Bank:

At a time when so many are struggling, including many with food insecurity, you are always there for them helping youth, helping various charities and supporting frontline and essential workers. And I know you just alluded to it, but it clearly is part of your DNA.

Pasquale Presa:

Yeah. It's important to give because just like St. Francis, the more you give, the more it comes back. And it's about pilgrimage. It's about helping one another and that's, what's in our DNA. We have to be able to do that. We have pizzas, we want to give away. We have meals, we want to give away. Calzones, strombolis, why not? Why not?

Bill Von Bank:

As you reflect on this past year and the changes to your business, and as you look forward, what inspires you?

Pasquale Presa:

What inspires me is what we never had growing up. The opportunity to be able to give within your heart, meet people. And I remember very vividly where we lived in a small little house in Italy. My brothers and I, we slept in the same bed. And for me, I see that the inspiration is just always doing the right thing, being honest, being ethical giving and being part of a community, being part of a town where we become a household name to people that they can come by trust our product, trust our food, trust us, to be able to be part of this amazing community with the best healthcare, the best doctors in the world. I mean, we talk to them every day when they come to our restaurants, visitors from all over the world, that we engage with in truth, we try to comfort them. So that inspires me to continue to do what comes from our hearts every day.

Bill Von Bank:

Pasquale Presa best of luck to you. Thank you for being our guest on Urban Evolution.

Pasquale Presa:

Thank you. It was an honor.

Bill Von Bank:

And thank you for tuning in to Urban Evolution, more info about the podcast and our guests can be found at urbanevolutionpodcast.com. Be sure to subscribe. Urban Evolution is a production of Destination Medical Center, economic development agency. Learn more at dmc.mn, stay safe and be well.