

Pasta

GUYS

Two friends come full circle, founding a business using a skill learned during college days

By Kate Savage / Photos by Mark Mahan

Sometimes it's necessary to travel full circle to arrive at the original starting point and realize you belonged there all along. This is certainly true for Reinaldo Gonzalez and Lesme Romero, best friends and co-owners of Lexington Pasta.

Both grew up in Venezuela but at different ends of the country. It wasn't until attending Case Western Reserve in Ohio — where each had enrolled to learn English as a second language — that they met and realized how much they had in common. With Spanish fathers and Italian mothers, a South American heritage, a love of food, and that “fiesta” spirit, they became instant friends. As students, they shared an apartment in Cleveland's Little Italy neighborhood, living above a popular local Italian restaurant where they worked for four years to help finance their schooling and learned how to make pasta from scratch.

As Romero says with fond recollection, “It was there that we learned the difference of homemade pasta. There were always people lined up at that restaurant door because they knew it was fresh and good — we noticed that then and always kept it in mind.”

After learning English, Gonzalez went on to study industrial engineering, and

Reinaldo Gonzalez, left, and Lesme Romero followed their hearts in starting Lexington Pasta Co.



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Romero pursued a degree in business. “We parted ways after we graduated,” said Gonzalez. Romero joined Merrill Lynch in Cleveland, and Gonzalez started working with General Electric in a rotational program that sent him to a different location every six months.

Assigned the Lexington market in 2003, a lonely Gonzalez called Romero in Cleveland and said, “Hey, Lesme, there’s something here called the Derby. Why don’t you come down and we’ll party.” Not quite knowing what he was getting into, Romero said “sure,” and drove from Cleveland in three hours. They partied all night at the now-defunct Red Seville, where, as best Romero can remember, there were flamenco dancers and paella. More import-



Top, long and short pasta, ravioli, and gnocchi are among the varieties Lexington Pasta produces. The company has expanded its services to ship pasta to all 50 states.

ant, though, in the gaiety of the festivities, Gonzalez met his future wife. They made it to the Derby the next day, but Romero says rather ruefully, “We were in the in-

field and never saw a horse.”

Meanwhile Romero took a job with Citigroup and moved to Florida. Gonzalez married, took a job with Nestle in Mt. Sterling, and settled down to the daily commute from Lexington.

In 2008 Romero visited Lexington again, and this time the two friends went to the Farmers Market. Loaded up with fresh produce, they returned to Gonzalez’s home and Romero said, “Let’s make fresh pasta like the old days.” This time it was Gonzalez’s turn to say “sure.” With only a KitchenAid mixer and a rolling pin, they proceeded to make fresh spinach pasta. Romero remembers saying to Gonzalez, “This is so much fun; I wish I could do this for a living,” and Gonzalez replying, “With

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your background and my background, I think we can make this happen.” That night Lexington Pasta Company was conceived over a bottle of Chianti, a plate of local veggies, and fresh spinach fettuccine.

Ultimately abandoning their corporate careers, they launched their pasta production business in Gonzalez’s basement in 2009. Adding an electric pasta cutting machine to the original basics of the KitchenAid mixer and rolling pin, they followed the pasta-making process of mixing, flattening, and then cutting; turning out about a pound of fresh pasta per hour.

Fired up with the enthusiasm of entrepreneurialism, they would make 5 pounds (five hours work) of pasta every day and then visit various restaurants in town trying to break into that market. Their typical promotional line would be: “Hey, we are a new business in town making fresh pasta. Give us a try,” and they



Above and right, Fani Diaz makes ravioli at the company’s shop on North Limestone Street. Lexington Pasta produces 2,000 pounds of pasta a week.



would leave samples in a Ziplock bag.

At first they heard a lot of “no thanks” or “we make our own” or “we don’t need fresh pasta.” Then, after several weeks of persistence, they got the call they were waiting for. It was from Andy Myers, Bellini’s chef at the time, who called and said, “Lesme, I like your product. I know you guys use 100 percent semolina flour. Can I have 20 pounds for tomorrow?” Again the response was “sure.”

At this point they were still working out of Gonzalez’s basement, and they still only had equipment that produced pasta at the rate of one pound per hour. With no shortcuts when it comes to making pasta, it took the requisite 20 hours to fill the order. Gonzalez shared that toward the end he was just beating and almost weeping on the dough he was so exhausted, especially when, after 19 hours of non-stop production, their little machine started to emit smells and sounds of protestation. Romero says they even started talking to it — “please don’t stop, please, please, you can do it ...” Two days later Bellini’s ordered another 20 pounds.

The original Bellini’s order sold for the same price per pound that Lexington Pasta charges today.

An order that took two people 20 hours of sweat, exhaustion, and tears was billed at \$80. “To be honest,” Romero says, “it wasn’t about the money; it was that someone finally liked our product. We were doing something right, even if it was almost free.”

Meanwhile, with Bellini’s as a converted customer, word started to spread among chefs. Suddenly Portofino, Dudley’s, Azur, and Deauville were lining up for supplies of fresh pasta. Some wanted specific shapes, cuts, flavors, and portion sizes, and Gonzalez and Romero said “sure” and obliged. But the time had come to take the business seriously.

Moving out of Gonzalez’s basement, they



Ravioli in various stages of completion awaits final packaging.

rented a licensed commercial kitchen for six months and addressed the pressing need for a more workhorse-like pasta machine. Despite the seller’s advice, they decided to buy a smaller machine that was capable

of making five pounds of pasta an hour. Neither could imagine needing anything bigger — ever. It cost \$7,000 as opposed to \$13,000 for the larger recommended model. They put it on their credit card. Romero looks back and says, “We thought the vendor was trying to up-sell us, but he was right in his assessment of our needs, and we were wrong. These days we only use the La Monferina for cooking classes.”

Wanting a more permanent space, they found their present downtown location, a converted two-car garage on North Limestone Street, and again moved. “This place seemed so big,” Romero says, looking around a space that five years later



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The partners discuss outfitting their soon-to-open pasta-making plant and café on Delaware Avenue.

is packed to the rafters. “We just had one stainless steel table, a fridge, a three-compartment sink, our new five-pound pasta-making machine, rolling pin, cutter, and KitchenAid.”

Feeling more and more secure in their restaurant wholesale business, the “Pasta Guys” decided it was time to try the retail market. The local Farmers Market seemed the perfect outlet. For that first weekend they made 20 pounds of pasta, packaged in 4-ounce individual servings in a Ziplock bag. “We got up at 6 a.m.,” says Gonzalez. “We were excited. But by 10 a.m. the pasta was all gone.” The following week they made 50 pounds, but previous customers had returned and brought their friends. They were sold out by 11 a.m.

Meeting their growing restaurant demands as well as preparing for the Farmers Market often meant staying up all Friday night. “One of our biggest challenges,” said Lesme, “was teaching people how to cook and eat fresh pasta. Most people were over-

A photograph of a woman wearing a white equestrian shirt, light-colored breeches, and a brown riding helmet, smiling as she sits on a brown horse. The horse is wearing a dark fly sheet. They are outdoors with trees in the background.

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From left, Reinaldo Gonzalez, Rosa Rojas, Angel Perez, Fani Diaz, and Lesme Romero are taking Lexington Pasta to the next level.

cooking it. One lady told me that the way she cooked pasta was to drop it in boiling water, leave, watch a movie, then come back, and it would be ready”.

Both Gonzalez and Romero are natural showmen and being at the Farmers Market gave them a stage and a visual presence in the community. One late morning this October, a long line of people waited to buy their weekly quota. One such young couple, Ryan and Ann Copple, buy three to five bunches of pasta every Saturday. Ryan said, “I like to support local business and love the product.” Ann added: “The flavors themselves are enough and don’t need a whole lot of extra ingredients. Just good olive oil and cheese.”

Predictably their customers started wanting the product available in grocery stores, not just on Saturdays at the Farmers Market. Good Foods Co-Op was the first to recognize this demand. Whole Foods followed, then Fresh Market, Liquor Barn, and finally all 13 local Krogers. “Before, we used to call everyone and chase the business. Now they call us,” Romero said. Sysco, a huge wholesale supplier in the South, has added the pasta to its product inventory.

Wanting to expand into farmers markets in Louisville, Cincinnati, and Berea, Lexington Pasta developed an incentive program with subcontractor entrepreneurs in these cities, lending them a canopy, banner, and cooler, selling them their pasta at wholesale price, and then allowing them to make their own sales. “It’s a great motivator,” said Romero, “and a wonderful way to help a small business grow; plus, it now gives us a presence in these cities.”

With business building blocks in place, dependable employees, and weekly pasta production increased from 200 pounds in the early years to 2,000 pounds five years later, Lexington Pasta is taking it to the next level. Again listening to their customers clamor, they are expanding into the restaurant business.

They are in the process of rehabbing a new factory location at 962 Delaware Ave. They plan to move into their new 8,000-square-foot space later this fall. Pasta production will take place at the back of the facility. A commercial kitchen in the middle will host their popular cooking classes, as well as exclusive pasta dinner events, and the front space will

be the Pasta Garage Italian Café. “There will be about 30 seats,” Gonzalez said, “but this is a casual place. You’ll be able to see us making the pasta, pick your shapes, sauce, and toppings. It will be fast and fresh.”

Meanwhile, dedicated patrons of their downtown location will be relieved to know they have renewed their lease for another 12 years. Although pasta production will no longer take place there, Romero said they plan to operate the space as an Italian bodega. Their pasta, sauces, and even an expanded line of ready-made meals will be available there. A hot pasta bar operating daily from 11 a.m. to 3 p.m. will be added once the production equipment is moved. Bread, olive oils, parmesan, prosciutto de Parma, and a range of other pasta complementing products will also be sold.

Asking about the significance of the name Pasta Garage Italian Café, Romero volunteers that its location at North Limestone is in an old converted garage, and when they move to Delaware they will be taking the old roll-up door with them. “People are familiar with the look,” says Romero, “and at the same time we want to catch the wave. What did Amazon, Cadillac, and Hewlett-Packard all have in common? They all started their business in a garage.”

And so two young men who met in college and made pasta to help pay for their education have come full circle. “A lot of things have happened — there’s an element of serendipity,” says Gonzalez. “We have tried to take advantage of the opportunities when they presented themselves. This business is nothing like our original vision.” **KM**