

Wyckoff Entrepreneur Aldo Cascio's Recipe for Success is Hard Work and Scrumptious Cuisine



(Right to Left) CIANJ Vice President Debra Romano, The Brick House's Owner/Chef Aldo Cascio, *COMMERCE* Contributing Editor Signy Coleman and her daughter, Isabella. Photos by Guy Brown, G H Brown Communications

BY SIGNY COLEMAN AND BETHANY COLEMAN-ATHERTON
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ON THE MORNING OF SEPT. 11, 2001, A COORDINATED suicide attack by Al-Qaeda terrorists on the United States of America would change forever the emotional landscape of our country and the geography of Manhattan. The Twin Towers of The World Trade Center collapsed into a steaming pile of rubble and twisted steel. The damage was overwhelming. The grief was profound.

In the town of Wyckoff, across the Hudson River, a restaurateur by the name of Aldo Cascio received a phone call from a local woman trying to organize restaurants to donate prepared food to feed the volunteer workers at Ground Zero.

Aldo agreed immediately, quickly putting his staff to work prepping and cooking. He contacted one of his local suppliers asking to use their trucks for the food delivery, and the supplier agreed. When Aldo arrived the following day at Ground Zero, he was not alone; hundreds of other restaurants and people had also brought food; the response was overwhelming. Aldo soon realized that although the food was being delivered early in the morning, many of the workers were not eating the food until well into the night.

Nothing was hot or fresh; he felt the workers' tireless effort and dedication deserved something better. He

took it upon himself to investigate if he would be allowed to bring stoves, equipment and fresh food down to Ground Zero and cook for them there. He spoke to a woman in charge, explaining what he would like to be able to do and she agreed, telling him that he would have to be met at the George Washington Bridge and escorted down to Pier 40.

Every Sunday for the next two months, Aldo Cascio and his restaurant staff loaded up the trucks, set up a kitchen, and cooked for the relief workers of 9/11. The workers coming off of their shifts of digging through tangled masses of steel, concrete and debris were greeted with a hearty meal. Their appreciation was heartfelt; their gratitude, evident.

Aldo is modest when he shares this story, giving most of the credit to his suppliers who, he has said, so generously donated the food. With the food provided, Aldo was free to do what he is so passionate about—cook, feed and nurture those around him. He told me during the course of our interview that he wishes there was more he could have done during those very dark days. He wishes there was more he could do now to make the world a better place. We believe he already has.

COMMERCE: *You moved to America from Sicily with your father when you were fifteen. Was it difficult for you as an adolescent to assimilate into the American culture and did you speak English?*

ALDO CASCIO: No, I did not speak English. It was semi-difficult because when I came I started working in an Italian restaurant and everybody in the kitchen spoke Italian. The fact that I was surrounded by Italians from

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almost the same town I grew up in—that made it a little easier. Once I was out of my working environment, it was difficult. I didn't go to school when I came here; just right to work in Macaluso's in Hawthorne, New Jersey. I am still friends with the family; in fact, his son works for me here at the restaurant.



The Brick House offers a unique meeting space that can accommodate up to 150 people. With a conference table, wireless Internet access and a flat-screen television, "it's the perfect spot for corporate board meetings, sales presentations and stockholder meetings," says owner/chef Aldo Cascio.

Photos by Guy Brown,
G H Brown Communications

Q. *What was your father's motivation to come here from Sicily?*

A. My father was a chef also and he was hired by Joe Macaluso to come and work in his restaurant. My grandmother was in Staten Island, so it was always a dream of my mother's to come to America. That was the opportunity, to have my father come and the rest of the family would follow. The whole family never really made it over here, because my father didn't really care for America—he left after only 40 days and went back to Italy. I stayed with the Macaluso family and the other workers, sharing an apartment and working. I was 15, so I grew up rather quickly.

Q. *You started out as a dishwasher. When did you realize you had a future as a chef?*

A. I think becoming a chef just kind of evolved. I worked in the kitchen for about seven or eight years, first as a dishwasher then as a sous chef, doing the prep work. Then I started working in the dining room as a busboy but worked my way up to waiter. When I left Macaluso's, I went to work for my cousin in a restaurant

in Ridgewood named Spellino—it was 1978 and that's when I started cooking. I would cook in the mornings and then wait tables at lunch and dinner, which is where I got my experience dealing with people. I don't know if I ever really had a moment where I knew that I wanted to become a chef, or that I thought I had any real talent for that matter. I just knew that I had a passion for the restaurant business because it was the only thing I really knew. I think it's a dream for many people to own a restaurant, especially if you don't have an education or a college degree. I found a little place in Wyckoff in 1983, so probably about 12 years after I came to America I opened my own little place, Aldo's. We started out with about 12 or 13 tables. Today, we have about 150 tables.

Q. *Who has been your greatest mentor in life and in cooking?*

A. My father was my mentor, and as far back as I can remember, always cooked and worked in a kitchen. I have always said to myself, "I wish I could be the man my father was..." just because he was such a good man. A father of seven, he always took care of everybody, and always worked. He instilled a very strong work ethic in me. My mother had a very strong personality as well, very strong in her convictions and beliefs in regards to doing the right thing and being a good person. Joe Macaluso was also a very important figure in my life; he inspired me as well with his work ethic. His place was very big and there was always a lot to do. He would never think twice about jumping in to wash dishes or mop a floor and always treated the customers very well. I kind of followed his example of how to run a business because I always admired how he would treat people—all people.

Q. *What are your three favorite tools to use in the kitchen?*

A. A good knife. I have a set of knives I have been using for 20 years. It's the first case of knives I ever bought for myself. You also need a good frying pan and a good stove. The most important thing you need in the kitchen, however, is the will to do well and the desire to work and produce something good.

Q. *When you get into the kitchen, do you still get excited about cooking?*

A. Yes, absolutely! I grew up working in a restaurant that was very fast-paced. We worked in a line and would serve five, six hundred dinners in a five hour span, so at the end of the night, you feel good—like you have really accomplished something. So when I opened up my own restaurant, I always liked that feeling of controlled chaos. I guess I work better under pressure. I feel right at home.

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Q. *Do your children share your passion for cooking?*

A. No, not really. My daughter was born to be in the restaurant business. She worked for me for years when she was younger, working the door as a hostess; she was a natural with people. She's married now and works for an Italian designer. My son just finished college and is just now starting to work for me. He's starting to show some interest in the business, but I'm not sure if he has the same passion. I see a few signs, but we'll have to wait and see.



Aldo Cascio stands next to his fine wine collection at The Brick House. Since he owns and operates Pane e Vino—a wine and cheese shop in Wyckoff—he knows just what to stock for his sophisticated customers. Inset: The menu at The Brick House has something for every palate, from fresh seafood to prime steaks and chops to signature dishes such as Chicken Roger.

Photos by Guy Brown, G H Brown Communications

Q. *Besides your own restaurant, where is your favorite place to eat?*

A. I have a friend, Remo Mastrangelo, who owns a little place in New York City called Quattro Gatti, on 81st between 2nd and 3rd—that's my place to eat. I love his parpadelle; it's so delicious. They have fresh fish—everything he makes is wonderful. I love going there because even though you are in the middle of New York, you don't feel like it. It's small and everyone is very friendly and I feel comfortable there. And it's very inexpensive. Le Cirque was another one of my favorites, but I really just like to go where I feel welcome and taken care of. I read an article once written by a restaurateur who was retiring that said, "A good waiter can make a mediocre meal look very good, a bad waiter can make a good meal very bad." I feel a lot of someone's dining experience is about how they are treated, finding the right balance between kitchen and service, particularly in this economy. I know that at my restaurants, we try the best we can to please our customers. This is very, very important to

me. I love both of my restaurants, but Aldo's is my pride and joy, my baby. We have people who have been coming to the restaurant for 25 years, whose children grow up, get married, have children of their own and come with their families.

Q. *If you could have dinner with one person living or deceased, who would that be and what would you serve?*

A. I'm a soccer fanatic and so I would love to have dinner with Pelé. Growing up, he was my idol, one of the best soccer players in the world and a fascinating person. You sit and have dinner with someone and it's always a surprise what really transpires. If that was possible, I would want to have dinner with 007, Sean Connery.

Q. *What is your favorite dish to make?*

A. Spaghetti carbonara.

Q. *If you were stranded on a deserted island and could only pick three things to eat, what would they be?*

A. Pasta, bananas and wine.

Q. *You learned the game of soccer playing on the streets of Sicily and watching your favorite team, Inter Milan. Did you ever dream of becoming a professional soccer player yourself?*

A. I think every kid in Italy wakes up in the morning and goes to bed at night wishing he could be a professional soccer player.

Q. *You give back to the community by coaching soccer and donating food and your restaurant space for a number of events.*

A. The truth is, the kids help me a lot more than I help them. You learn so much by watching them and knowing their situations and how they process things. I was lucky because my son was on the team I coached, which gave me the opportunity to spend quality time with him and to be able to work with other kids. My best memories with my son are the soccer trips we took together and all the time we were able to spend because of it.

In terms of donating the restaurant space and food, I believe it's so important to give back to the community, to all the people who have supported you. You cannot tell every individual person how much you appreciate their patronage over the years, so you try to do it in a different way. Every time I donate something, every time I help someone, this is my way of saying, "Thank you." ■