

George Katakalidis

Scores with Daphne's Greek Café and Keeps Playing the Field

by Melissa Rich

Forced to find a job when an injury stopped his professional career in the tracks, George Katakalidis spent time "soul searching" before he slowly warmed to the idea of owning a restaurant or two. Now, with 75 Daphne's Greek Café locations, he's discovered a CEO's life isn't so different from a pro athlete's.

"I played center midfield most of my life in soccer and I loved being the field general. In essence that's what I'm doing now in a different format."

Born in Greece and raised in Toronto, he entered professional soccer at the ripe old age of 18 and played in New York, San Jose and finally San Diego.

"While I was injured I had a good nine months to figure out what I was really good at." A business management degree already under his belt, "I said you know, I'm a bit of an entrepreneur." Greek and athletic, health food was his passion. "When I was a kid I loved working in restaurants. I had a lot of fun. I never owned one myself and [the idea] excited me quite a bit."

He started small with Greek to Go in Sorrento Valley. "I wasn't sure if I was going to enjoy the restaurant industry. One restaurateur told me as I was first getting in the business 'once you get in, you can't get out.'" Hooked, by the third opening he decided to "upscale everything" and expand the menu. Daphne's was born.

Expansion meant Orange County and Los Angeles, "but an opportunity came to open in Scottsdale and we thought Phoenix could be a good market."

The Arizona market is, "a little bit more sparse. The market itself is oversaturated as compared to San Diego, meaning there are a lot of restaurants for less people. But it is a much wider market too and it's also growing and changing all the time."

His biggest complaint about the industry: "Dealing with law makers that just don't get it and they're constantly trying to figure a way to tax the restaurant industry. All of these taxes in essence are taxes on the people, not necessarily on restaurant operators." His suggestion: "Pay [law makers] a lot less, so this way they'll only talk about what's important. Cut *their* budget in half," he chuckles.

He scores at strategic planning, "where the menu is going to evolve to, where the category Greek as a whole will evolve to, as opposed to day-to-day operating."

Next up, he's ready to franchise Daphne's. "I did not feel that we could do it very well before this time." And he just secured a 7,000 square foot space in downtown San Diego for an upscale Greek restaurant: new name, new company.

Will the new restaurant be the first of many units? "Stay tuned." A true team leader, he'll never reveal a play in the middle of the game. ☺

