

## **Alumni Interview: Margarita Cozzi, '09**

General Manager of Il Verdi Italian restaurant, Tropicana Atlantic City

**Sarah Grady (SG):** Hello my name is Sarah Grady, and I am with Margarita Cozzi today, for our Lights On: Alumni Interview. Thank you all for being with us today and we'll get right to the interview.

*Margarita, could you tell us a little bit about yourself?*

**Margarita Cozzi (MC):** Yes. Good morning. Thank you for having me. It's a pleasure to be here.

So, my name is Margarita Cozzi. I was born and raised in Bulgaria and my passion to travel brought me to the United States in 2003 as a J1 student, which is exchange programs for students, to come work in the United States for five months and then have one month to travel.

I was sent to Kentucky, Louisville, Kentucky, and I worked for Six Flags. I got a second job in a restaurant which right away spiked my passion for the restaurant industry and hospitality as a whole.

I went back to Bulgaria for a couple months. Finished my bachelor's in marketing, but I was just eager to come back. So, I came back the following summer and I came to Atlantic City in 2004. The Casino industry was booming and right away I got a job in a fine dining restaurant, and I just knew this is where I belong. Very shortly after that I pursued education. I got my associate degree from ACC and bachelor's in hospitality from Stockton.

I have held every position in the front of the house from a busser to general manager. And I have owned two restaurants in Avalon along with my ex-husband and his brother, so, I have stepped into the back of the house which I realized that it's a scary place for me. Very challenging.

You know, life kind of took me on a different path for a little bit. I had to do real estate. I went through um, divorce so I had to switch gears in order to care for my family.

I did real estate for six years. Absolutely loved it, but there was something missing for me.

In March of 2023 a wonderful opportunity came my way, and I was hired as a food and beverage manager for Caesars Entertainment, and I took over Il Verdi restaurant which is Tropicana's fine dining Italian restaurant and one of the oldest Italian restaurants in the city.

For me. It was coming home. I remember the first day when I worked 12 hours and I was like everybody was saying, you're crazy. You know those hours are crazy. Your kids are still young. What are you doing? And I said, well, it feels right for me. So, yes, I have been there ever since.

It's a phenomenal industry. It's not for everyone. And it's not a job that you can pursue just for the money. You have to love it. You have to have a passion. Because we're not in the restaurant business, we are in the people business. And we deliver hospitality.

We alter the experience for the guest. And if you don't have it in you, to make somebody's day and to recover from an experience. Even if your life might not be in the perfect situation, then you're going to become resentful.

So, I took over a very small staff of seven servers. I had to hire more servers, bussers, greeters. Our team was very uncertain what to expect from the new space because we moved from a very small room on the casino floor to double the size, if not triple the size.

But I told my people, I am here with you. I will treat you the way I treat my children. There will be days you're going to hate me. There will be days that you're going to love me. But I'll be behind you no matter what.

So, eight months later, I look back and I just see how much we have accomplished, and the experiences that we have created for the many, many guests that we got to host for the eight months we've been in the new the new room.

I guess, no two days are the same and I think this is what makes the hospitality business so exciting. I'm a person that likes – I'm very dynamic person. I don't like office settings. I don't know how people do it. I need to move. I need to talk. I need to use my hands. I like challenges.

and that's why I just – my heart gets light on fire. You know it's 5:00 when we open the doors. Then when I know that, you know, the line out the door, it's going to be all the way to table games. It's exciting to me.

Of course, don't get me wrong. You know, we have those nights when I'm like scratching my head and thinking, what was I thinking?

The biggest challenge I have and it's not really – I wouldn't use the word challenge – more of an opportunity – is motivating my employees, because it starts with the employees.

If you have happy employees, you're going to have happy guests. I would like to create an environment where we're having fun. Of course we're following the steps of service. But you've got to have fun, you know.

You're on stage. I tell my servers and my bussers and my runners. Think of being on stage, you know. You become somebody else. Use that hour and a half, you know – which is the average time of turning a table – to just perform. And you know, you have to customize your show. Some people come in, they want to eat and go. Some people want a little bit of a show. Some people like you to listen to them. Some people don't want to be bothered. And just try to make the best of it.

You know, you're given multiple opportunities to win the guest or lose the guest. Be very careful. And have fun with it. At the end of the day, we're not operating on people's brains. We're serving food and we just want you to leave happy.

On the guest side, I'd like to say the opportunities that I see most of the time are recovering from experiences. For instance, I'm very fortunate because most of the time guests complain while they're dining in the restaurant. That gives me the opportunity right there on the spot to step in,

and I have about 20 seconds to figure out what do I have to do. What is the best thing that I can do right now to recover this guest's experience and make sure that he leaves happy?

So, those are my most challenging moments. And I have mastered from 20 years in the industry what to do. Is it buying dessert? Is it inviting them to come back again and start all over again? Is it like, using humor. Is it like...

You know at the end of the day the guest wants to be heard. It's not that the steak was overcooked. It's the way that it wasn't handled or was handled poorly. And that's what makes us leaders stand out.

It's not the mistake. Everybody makes mistakes. But it's the way you fix the mistakes, is where the magic happens.

So that's basically it. I know it's not easy, but it's exciting to me. I am 1000% sure this is where I belong.

Recently I was a guest speaker for the career development class at Stockton University. And I told the students, if you don't take anything else from this, I want you to take only one piece of advice. Whatever career you pursue, make sure it feels right and makes you feel good. Don't pursue a career for the paycheck, because you'll become resentful. You're going to become tired. And life's too short. If it makes you happy painting rocks and selling them on the boardwalk, be it. Because where energy floats, money comes. And happiness comes. Don't pursue a career because, oh it's great money. Well, don't do it for the money. So that's my advice for everybody that is seeking any career path.

A little bit about my experience at Stockton. Well, from ACC to Stockton, I feel like I was just put on the right path. I met incredible people. I was awarded the first Beaujolais event scholarship. In, oh God, probably like 16 years ago. So, I get to learn about the Chaîne (Chaîne des Rotisseurs) organization. The Concierge Association. The Korean Society. So, the best thing that I got from my education was an amazing network and connections that I created throughout multiple events.

Of course, you know learning in the classroom, reading books, study guides. Of course, I learned a lot, but meeting people that actually bring years of experience in industry really was the most beneficial.

Until today, I am a great friend with some of my instructors. We get to share a cup of coffee and he's always excited to hear about my next adventure in hospitality.

So, that's like networking in any business. But particularly in hospitality you have to connect with people. You can't sit behind the desk and expect.

Because, you know we all uh have the same opportunities, challenges. But when we sit down and connect, we learn from each other, and you never know how somebody's path will cross with yours in the future.

I'm like, oh yeah, I remember you. Remember? I was a student in Stockton. Here we go. Now I am the manager at Tropicana, good for you. It comes full circle, I guess.

**SG:** Great stuff! I mean, wonderful to hear your journey and your experience at Stockton. And all of your wonderful advice for somebody pursuing a career and choosing what gives you energy. Choosing what you enjoy and love and connecting with people to learn.

Wonderful, wonderful remarks and comments that I'm so excited to share with our audience. You've hit all of our major highlights. Do you have any other remarks or comments, anything that you would have loved to have told Margarita 20 years ago?

**MC:** Well I, I guess the most important thing – I'm going to use is a quote actually.

I love to read books, it's part of my – you know, because we have to grow. It doesn't matter if you're 25 or 55, we need to grow no matter what. So, I love to read books and one of the most inspiring people I've ever read books about is Steve Jobs.

He has a quote that says you can only connect the dots looking backwards.

So, everything that happens, happens for a reason, to put you on the right path. And if you follow your heart and what feels right, you will turn around one day and you're going to say, oh yeah that happened because I had to do this, in order to get to this, to this.

So, don't ever be scared. Just do what feels right. And it doesn't matter if you're talking about career. Personal life. Friendships. Just know that if you're doing the right things, and you're following what the heart is telling you or the gut, you'll always end up where you belong.

So that is, that's what I would tell Margarita, because there were times when I was uncertain. I was like. Wow, what. I got a Hospitality degree, but now I have two very young children. Like, what was thinking. And I was anxious at times. I was like you know what? I spend all this time and money and like, do I have to throw it away? No, we don't.

It's timing. Timing always brings you to the path that you belong on. Timing brings you to the path.

**SG:** That's a great thought. Well, I want to thank you so much Margarita for taking the time today to talk to me. To us.

It's been absolutely wonderful, and great to be able to hear and share your story.

So, I'm going to thank our viewers and go ahead and wrap up our Alumni Interview for Lights On.

And again, thank you so much Margarita. It's been wonderful.

**MC:** Thank you. Have a great day. Thank you.

