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Salad Man

By: Alix Hayes



John Scardapane is the architect of a better salad. This “master builder” uses unlikely tools to construct his “works,” including lettuce, tomatoes, carrots, figs and a host of other yummy ingredients that all go in to building the gourmet salad.

Scardapane, who lives in Cherry Hill, is founder and chief executive officer of Saladworks, a Pennsylvania-based salad franchise company with original roots in South Jersey. The first Saladworks store was located at the Cherry Hill Mall, and South Jersey continues to be a leading region, with a high concentration of franchises (besting Philadelphia for number of outlets). “What we have noticed is people living in South Jersey don’t like going into the city to eat.”

The king of gourmet salads wears cashmere, drives an expensive luxury car and gets his nails manicured. He’s a savvy, modern businessman—an innovator who recognized a need in the food service industry and had the passion to see his idea come to fruition. “The original thought came to me when I was working an 80-hour week at a country club (as a chef). I couldn’t find anywhere where you could quickly go eat and get a healthy meal and not feel guilty,” says Scardapane. “I wanted something healthy. I wanted to do salads.” And the typical salad-bar fare would not do for Scardapane.

“I was in the kitchen of the country club day in and day out, and our pantry was stocked with all sorts of prepared vegetables and lettuce, and I was like, ‘Ding!’ What I saw everyday looked great and it looked healthy.” He saw the orders for salads going up, and burgers and unhealthier items going down.

Twenty-two years ago, while having lunch at the Cherry Hill Mall, Scardapane discovered mall management needed a replacement store to fill the void from a failed Italian eatery in the food court. When he initially proposed the all-salad concept—after studying food court traffic—mall officials insisted he offer sandwiches. But Scardapane believed he was on to something. It was the late 1980s, and he knew the health-food craze was beginning; he strongly believed hungry customers would buy salads amid a sea of hamburgers, Chinese food and cheesesteaks. (He agreed to offer some sandwiches at that first South Jersey store, but within three months he took them off the menu because they weren’t selling.) After 18 months, Scardapane’s Saladworks was the top-grossing unit in the food court.

Branching out and opening his first Saladworks outside the mall took time, money, and chutzpah. “It takes a lot of courage to leave a job for a new idea. I thought everyone was going to be excited, and instead, they were like, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ It’s a lot like blowing up a balloon of courage and everyone is standing around you with pins.

“It wasn’t a prove-you-wrong idea. It was just that I was committed to doing this. I knew that if we had failures, we’d muster through it.” One failure actually turned into the spark that ignited the successful concept to franchise Saladworks.

“We were doing a lot of volume, but we didn’t love the system in place. Not every store had the quality and service that I wanted.” In 1989, after repeatedly noticing one of the dozen company-owned stores was making late deposits, Scardapane installed a closed-circuit security system. Those lenses caught an employee dealing drugs after close of business. Scardapane realized he couldn’t be everywhere at once, and it was virtually impossible to monitor every employee. That’s when he sold, mostly to family and friends, all but one of the stores and also began selling franchises.

There now are nearly 90 Saladworks across the country. Last month, along with plans for major East Coast expansion, it was announced that millionaire former banker Vernon Hill II will join Saladworks as Chairman of the Executive Committee. In Florida, where there already are a few franchise stores, plans on the chopping board include the addition of 30 more. Saladworks also hopes to open more company-owned stores along with the dozens more franchises it plans to open by 2010.

Scardapane created the company's core values system (believe in what you're selling, serve superior salads, please the customer, etc.) because, he says, it's the way he treats his children—with honesty and respect. "You can't have a set of values at work and a different set at home. Our competitive edge is our values, our company culture. People can copy our stores, but not our complete vision."

With Scardapane leading the way, Saladworks is looking into fresh ways to build the better casual-dining restaurant. Saladworks now offers chef-inspired salads (with grilled salmon) and their test kitchen is exploring adding alternative spices to new menu options. "The goal is to make it really, really healthy without the consumer realizing it."

It's certainly ironic that this healthy living concept came from a man who didn't even eat lettuce on a regular basis. "I was not a salad eater. My Italian family grew up on meat and potatoes. [Growing up in Pennsauken], we rarely