

Focus: Kosmas “Tom” Koukoulis
Owner: Café Mezzanotte, UNCLE’s Hawaiian Grindz, and CAPICHE Street Food Italiano
FACT: Tom Koukoulis is 32 years old. That’s right, he is 32!

FACT: Attended the University of Baltimore. Tom bought his first restaurant, Café Mezzanotte, while in school.

FACT: Father of four. (Three handsome boys and a beautiful daughter who looks like Mom... thank goodness.)

Q: Tom, I believe success leaves clues. Most people would say you have experienced a level of success. Do you think so?



A: Yes.....I feel I have reached a modest level of personal and financial freedom.

Q: Define Success.

A: To be able to do what you enjoy and believe in and get paid for it.

Q: Share two “clues” that have fueled that success.

A: First, follow your heart and transform your business to what YOU know is right in your heart. It may not be obvious or easy, but the profits will follow. Second, team motivation! It is imperative for the team to have “buy in” on the vision. Share the vision!

Q: Take me through your day. Start to finish.

A: 4:00 to 8:00 am: Snoring, drooling, kids poking your face, dressing the kids
 9:00 am: At the restaurant
 12:00 to 2:00 pm: Dining room

with guests
 6:00 to 7:00 pm: Dining room with guests
 8:00 pm to 12:00 am: Restaurant office

Q: Toughest part of your job that you face EACH DAY?

A: Engaging my management and service staff for peak performance.

Q: Easiest?

A: Interacting with my guests. I enjoy it!

Q: How many people depend on your business decisions?

A: 100+

Q: Are you ever nervous about a decision?

A: Yes, I have been, but I can’t remember the last time I was.

Q: You are very determined about the need for the customers to see you. How much time in your day do you spend face-to-face with customers?

A: 2.5-3 hours. Definitely every lunch and dinner, as well as time in the bar area.



Q: Have you ever told a customer to leave? Why?

A: Yes. This individual was intoxicated, and I had warned him two times about disturbing guests.

Q: Tom, in an industry with a high failure rate, what makes you think you can succeed when most don’t?

A: “I enjoy this #@%!” I always do what I say I am going to do. I have laser



Restaurant Owner Komas "Tom" Koukoulis

focus on branding for each of my concepts, and I treat the importance of quality service and food equally.

Q: How much money do you make on a table of four? I know, I know...it all depends on what they order, but on average?

A: Café Mezzanotte: \$40; Uncle’s Hawaiian Grindz: \$25; Capiche Street Food Italiano (Projection) \$10.

Q: You don’t just own a restaurant, you own three! Why do you risk everything each day?

A: I enjoy knowing and accepting that I am an entrepreneur at heart. I have this burning desire to conquer the restaurant industry!

Q: What is your biggest sacrifice each day?

A: The time away from my wife and children. I have three restaurant families, soon to be



four, but nothing compares to quality time with my wife and kids!

Q: What percentage is actually your profit at year end?

A: 20 to 30 percent

Q: If you could change one thing

right now, what would it be?

A: WOW.....that’s a tough one. If I could, I would have worked at a greater variety of restaurants growing up. The experience would have benefitted my overall growth as a restaurateur.

Q: What scares you, I mean really scares you, about business...that point of “butterflies-in- your-stomach-heart-racing” kind of scared?

A: That I will forever be telling my wife and kids to be patient. We all have a choice: Make a living or design a life. I am designing our life. I strive to find those “core individuals” who will allow us a better quantity of family

Q: Do you have any advice for those thinking about heading in the same direction you have gone? Should they “blaze a trail” or follow “the road traveled” for a time?

A: The “road traveled” to start. Gut instinct, hunger, and desire will help build the foundation for “blazing trails.”

Q: Tom, thank you so much, my friend. I wanted to ask this as my last question: Do you have any questions for me?

A: I do. Considering the “Holy Trinity” of the restaurant business: Food-Ambiance-Service. What do you feel is the most important?

A: (Dennis) If I can pick ONLY one...it is service. When I go to a restaurant, I expect the service to be great. I will return to a restaurant that has great service and good food before I would make a second visit to a location that has bad service and outstanding food.

Dennis Barry is marketing director for Foodpro. He will be a contributor to FSM’s ongoing articles about entrepreneurship in the food industry.