

A slice of fun with Gina Navarrete

by BING PAREL-SALUD

Photography by WESLEY VILLARICA

Styling by CORINE ALEGRE

Venue/ RICHMONDE HOTEL, San Miguel Ave., Ortigas

"Every waking moment I have is spent thinking of ways to satisfy our customers, and how to improve the lives of our team members." So says Ma. Regina "Gina" Navarrete, general manager of Greenwich Pizza Corp. And from the way things have been going for the pizza chain, one could say that Gina is succeeding. Which is hardly surprising, considering that

Gina cut her teeth in the food business when she was barely in her teens, working as a cashier for the family restaurant that served pizza, burgers and fried chicken.

A B.S. Industrial Engineering graduate, *cum laude*, from the University of Sto. Tomas, Gina says she did not really see herself getting involved in the food business. "I always thought I would be a teacher or a journalist. But after I graduated, my father (the late *Veritas* magazine editor-in-chief Felix Bautista) discouraged me from teaching, saying I could do that later." Thus, she worked for a multinational manufacturing company as trainee and eventually got promoted to assistant product manager. Gina eventually transferred to Johnson & Johnson, where she worked her way up to become the business development director for Asia Pacific handling the baby products line.

"I was with Johnson & Johnson for nine years, until Jollibee Foods Corp. took me in as vice president for marketing in 1996. After five and a half years, I was promoted to head of Greenwich Pizza Corp., a Jollibee subsidiary. When my mom found out, she told me, 'Oh my God, Gina. You've come full circle!'" Gina discloses with a laugh, in obvious reference to the time when she worked as cashier in the family restaurant.

Asked if she did not find the shift from consumer products to the food industry difficult, Gina says the decision wasn't such a big leap because the work pretty much involves marketing as well. "It's only the industry that is different, but the work involved is also to find out what the customers want, what should be the pricing, how the products could be improved. The only difference is that the pace in the food industry is faster than regular consumer products like toiletry, facial care," Gina explains.

And for an economy that's supposed to be struggling, the brisk pace of business in fast food chains is remarkable. "We're lucky that Filipinos love to eat, but it's a challenge for us because costs have become so high. It's not just the raw materials but the electricity, the rent, LPG, etc., but we can't pass them on to customers so internally, we look for ways to be more productive. We conduct efficiency studies, we adjust manpower scheduling, we try to find ways with our equipment and processes, so that we can make more pizza or pasta in less time. Of course, all these should not be at the sacrifice of quality. Our customers expect a lot, and we want them to feel that they're getting their money's worth," Gina avers. >>>



GREENWICH GM
GINA BAUTISTA NAVARRETE

Part of Gina's job is also making sure that team members — as the staff of Greenwich is called — find fulfillment in their jobs and are motivated to do better. "I instituted the birthday chat, where I meet team members (who will be celebrating their birthdays for the month) for breakfast and they can ask me anything they want. I get a range of questions from the very strategic, like, 'Where do you see the company 10 years from now?' to the Miss Universe-type questions like 'How do you take care of your skin?' It's fun, and there are usually around 30 people with me," Gina says.

Tony Tan Caktiong and his family are very compassionate. They are very entrepreneurial, but with them, people come first, and I have imbibed this concern as well," she adds. This corporate philosophy has obviously worked well, because Greenwich is now the Philippines' No. 1 pizza. From a simple over-the-counter store in the Greenhills Commercial Center in 1971, Greenwich now has 231 stores all over the country, more than the sum of its two biggest competitors combined.

"Our stores are really a *'barkada'* place, and we know that people in a group have different tastes, so we offer a diversified menu, from pizza to lasagna to baked rice melt and boneless chicken barbecue. We have also introduced sodas in pitchers and other things besides to cater to group needs and tastes," Gina divulges.

While she obviously enjoys her work, Gina admits that there are downsides, and that stress comes with the territory. "I'm very lucky that my husband, Mike, has been very supportive. I've been working for 20 years and through the years I have learned to remove things that give me stress. For example, I used



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to drive but then I realized that I don’t really enjoy driving, and driving in Manila gives me stress, so I got a driver. That’s one. I used to plan our meals, but my husband is not very particular, so I let our cook do the job. And before the school year starts, we go to National Bookstore and I buy all kinds of paper and school materials so that when my sons (Mikko, 14 and Joel, 13) would text, ‘Mommy, I need a four-by-five-inch index card,’ I’d just text back, ‘It’s in the drawer,’” Gina smiles, adding that as much as possible she tries not to bring work home.

Try as she might, Gina admits she can never really resist “working.” “When I’m in a mall and I suddenly see a new restaurant, I have to go in, check the ambience, and try the food. If it’s an Italian place then I’ll order the pizza, and somehow you’re working but that’s not really ‘work’ work,” she says.

The biggest pressure, she says, is the realization that as head of the company, she carries the weight of knowing the livelihood of all the team members depends on her. “When I was at Jollibee as head of marketing, I could just turn it off at night. When I became head of Greenwich, it was like, ‘If my sales will not come in then the profit will not be in — Oh my God! What about their families, their children?’ Of course, these are for major decisions like a change in the direction of the company, or investing this much in something, things like that. I really want the bottom line to be very good so that we can give it back to team members. And I’m lucky that the company is very, very stable,” she discloses.

All things considered, one could say that Gina is enjoying the slice life has given her so far. ■

