

Pasha's

L I V E L I K E A P A S H A



Pasha's - South Beach - Pasha's

WHEN YOU THINK OF FAST FOOD THE FIRST THING THAT PROBABLY COMES TO MIND IS A GREASY HAMBURGER OR FRENCH FRIES FROM ONE OF THE NATIONAL RESTAURANT CHAINS. FOR DECADES, SO CALLED FAST FOOD HAS BEEN THE CAUSE OF A MAJOR AMERICAN EPIDEMIC – OBESITY. THE PROBLEM HAS ESCALATED TO THE POINT WHERE MORE PEOPLE DIE IN THE U.S. FROM OBESITY THAN ANY OTHER PREVENTABLE ILLNESS, AND A LOT OF THAT IS ATTRIBUTED TO THE HORRIBLE OVERLY FRIED TRANS-FAT FILLED FOOD SERVED AT THOSE WELL-KNOWN RESTAURANTS.

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By Thomas Barker | Photos by Dale Stine

The convenience, taste, and price make fast food a booming industry and they're not going to stop making money anytime soon. There's much more scrutiny today, however, and consumers continue to look for other more "healthy" options. One local restaurant trying to capitalize on the new "healthy" trend is the more upscale, trendy fast food restaurant on Lincoln Road called Pasha's.

Just a little more than a decade ago, Antonio Ellek, the founder and CEO of Pasha's, was attending Harvard Business School for his MBA. Antonio began to realize what he wanted to do with his life. He wanted to be an entrepreneur, that was easy. The difficult part was that he didn't just want to build a business that was financially profitable, he also wanted to create something that would change people's perception of an

often-maligned industry – and he wanted it to have a positive impact on the community.

While working in a field study program Antonio was asked to put together a successful business plan for a future company. Antonio combined his keen sense of business with his Mediterranean heritage and created a mock restaurant company called Pasha's. The restaurant would offer healthy fast food in a more upscale atmosphere, which was a little out there at the time. Who's ever heard of "healthy" fast food? Kind of an oxymoron. Well, Antonio's business plan was so solid, his professor actually wanted in on the project.

Five years later, Antonio's school project began to transform into a legitimate business. Antonio, his former school mates,

and half of the executive team from Burger King, began working together to implement Antonio's plan. Before they could even say hoummus, Pasha's was a reality, and the doors to their first location on Lincoln Road opened.

From the moment Pasha's served their first kebab, the restaurant was a success. The local community immediately fell in love with the inexpensive and healthy Mediterranean nibbles. Local trendsetters, celebrities, and business owners became regulars, giving the restaurant a solid clientele.

"Pasha's is just the type of restaurant that I've been wishing for," says Gary Bailey, a local actor and model and regular Pasha's customer. "I enjoy all the selections of food. Pasha's international influence reminds me of my travels abroad when

eating at some of the best restaurants around the world."

One of Pasha's most famous regular customers, Dr. Arthur Agatston, actually loved the food so much he included a couple "secret" recipes in his best selling book, The South Beach Diet. Now, you can spot locals using Pasha's menu as a way to maintain their diets while enjoying delicious cuisine.

"The food at Pashas is made fresh every day with no added preservatives, no trans fat and with quality ingredients," says Charles Berg, a local lawyer and regular Pasha's customer. "These are the same ingredients that not only make you feel good but also make you look good. It has made dieting easier knowing there is a restaurant that will satisfy my taste buds and fill me up with great healthy food, served quickly and affordably."

This was an amazing story and so very, very South Beach! Antonio immediately became one of Wire's best friends since, not only is he smart, he's also just such a genuine, caring, kind individual. They don't make many people the way Antonio is made so that's why we want to more extensively introduce him to our faithful and loyal readers. We encourage everyone to check out Pasha's at your

"During one OF MY FIELD STUDY programs, I CREATED THE Pasha's concept – HEALTHY, UPSCALE Mediterranean FAST FOOD."

earliest convenience and not be shy in telling Pasha's you read about them right here in Wire!

How did you end up on South Beach?

I was born in Istanbul, Turkey and grew up in the Swiss Alps where I went to school, so I'm half Swiss, half Turkish. I also spent a lot of my younger years in different parts of the Mediterranean. After I graduated high school, I wanted to continue my studies in the United States, so I packed everything up and headed to college. After I finished with my schooling, I wanted to gain some work experience here as well, so I took a job on Wall Street. As I was planning to go back to Switzerland, a number of my other friends were applying to go to graduate school, and I decided to join them. While I was getting my MBA in Boston, I decided to become an entrepreneur. And during one of my field study programs, I created the Pasha's concept – healthy, upscale Mediterranean fast food.

How did Pasha's go from being a college project to an actual business?

During the field study program we had to develop a business plan and basically create a company. The way it worked was you developed your idea and then presented it to the faculty, and if the faculty liked it, they supervise the implementation. This was back in the fall of 1995. When I presented my project, it focused on healthy, upscale fast food, while everyone else's projects focused



"Here at Pasha's we treat all of our customers like a Pasha, like a king."

on the internet. Everyone was going with technology, internet, and data and here I was talking about shish kebabs, houmous, and pita bread. At one point I was worried if the faculty was even going to take me seriously.

So how did your project actually take shape?

One evening I got a phone call from the chairperson of the entrepreneur department at Harvard's Business School. She said that she was interested in my project and she'd like to know more about it. She also told us that if she felt comfortable with the project she would associate herself with it. She also told us if we really wanted to make it happen that we needed to work for a period of at least four years in the field so I decided to work for Pepsi, which used to own the largest chains of restaurants in the world. They owned KFC, Taco Bell, Pizza Kitchen, and Chevys among a number of other restaurant chains.

I worked hard in the fast track management program with Pepsi. I had no prior experience whatsoever. My first assignment sent me to China then Louisville, Kentucky then Dallas then Hawaii and finally Deerfield Beach, where I worked with the Caribbean and Latin market.

Why did you start your business here in South Florida?

While I was working in Deerfield, I reconnected with my friends from school. I got in touch with Nicholas Cortes, who's from Colombia. He and I decided to launch the project. The original idea was meant to be implemented in Boston, but that all changed. Having lived here in South Florida, I came to appreciate the lifestyle and I had a number of resources here. Miami also offers an ideal market in terms of diversity. Miami is also very innovative. This is a tough market because it is very trendy. Places open and close so quickly. So if you can make a business or brand work here, the world is at your fingertips. The real test for the market is to see what happens in three years. Our very first restaurant

was on South Beach on Lincoln Road and we're still here!

Why Lincoln Road as your first location?

When I first moved here, Lincoln Road was great, but it wasn't what it is today. The two places that were interesting on South Beach were Ocean Drive and Lincoln Road, but Lincoln was just starting to take off with a more local scene. What's



important to us are our local customers. Of course, we like to have the tourist, but the locals are definitely number one. So we decided to open up on Lincoln Road. The problem was finding the right location. We wanted a corner, and there aren't very many corner locations on Lincoln. When Lunatika was on this corner, I fell in love with the space. This location was just great. The venue was beautiful and it just felt right.

It took us three years to develop the whole concept. We

invested a lot of time in doing research and development. It wasn't just "I have a healthy food concept, so let's do it." We worked with top professionals in the field from around the world, and we worked a lot with the locals to help build the concept. We built everything from scratch. We conducted thousands and thousands of interviews and tests. At the end of the day, our concept is for the local customer. We've adjusted everything to fit the needs of the local community as we've adopted things that have worked and discarded those that haven't. This location is definitely for them. We opened our first restaurant in October, 2003, and now we are in January, 2007 with four locations, and we have a few more locations in the pipeline. By May of this year, we should have seven locations!

What was your inspiration for Pasha's?

I have always loved to create and build something that offers something positive at the end of the day. With all of my respect for certain industries there are certain products that are not good for you, and I cannot see myself offering those products or services. I just would not have the drive or the passion to do it. While I was doing my research, I read a lot of newspaper articles discussing the obesity problem in this country. There was, and still is, an increasing number of people suffering from diabetes or having heart attacks. What you eat really affects your life.

I also looked at the top 25 restaurant chains in the world, and out of 25, three were Japanese and the rest were all American. Most of them were burgers and pizzas and fried chicken and hotdogs. There wasn't anything that was particularly healthy. So this is what made me think, what about a healthy fast food concept.

It's also a well known fact that a Mediterranean diet has always been healthy. Did your background help?

Growing up in the Mediterranean also helped a lot. I was exposed to the Mediterranean diet, which includes a lot of vegetables, nuts, and fruits. Mostly everything is grilled. They





eat a lot of seafood. And everything is cooked with the good oils like olive oil. And, of course, there's tons of wine. So the diet is naturally very healthy. Another thing that we realized; there were no upscale fast food restaurants anywhere, and we thought that there was definitely a need for it. So those three things helped shape the concept of Pasha's.

Why the name Pasha's?

We wanted to create an American brand, so this is not a concept that comes from any one particular place. It comes from a variety of different regions in the Mediterranean. This would even be innovative over there. Pasha's is a name that has been attributed in other countries like Turkey or India to a noble person – like a lord in England, but it has no association with politics. There's an expression "to live like a Pasha," which means to live like a king. The expression transcends many languages and basically represents a person who wants the good things in life. Someone who dresses well, eats well, has a nice house, so on and so forth. So we tell all of our colleagues here at Pasha's that we treat all of our customers like a Pasha, like a king. We have a sign in the back that actually says, "Remember, every customer is a Pasha."

What has been the turning point for Pasha's?

It really took us one year to really see the customer embracing the product. In the beginning it is very slow, and it is hard to break in. You are very anxious. You're constantly wondering if you are going to make it, but at the end of the day it's a natural selection. We were very ambitious. In the beginning we were going for the best of the best. We had almost no marketing in the beginning, which was really hard. We put so much work into the creation of Pasha's and we really couldn't market it the way we wanted to. So we were really relying on the word of mouth, and that doesn't happen over night. The way to really measure the success of a restaurant is to measure the growth trend. A lot of restaurants go through the usual big boom at the beginning. Everyone is excited about it and wants to be a part of it then it goes down. So if you are unable to bring in the repeat customers, you're going to be in trouble. If you look at the history of Pasha's, month after month our customer base increases. The word of mouth is really working for us, and people are coming back and bringing more people with them. When I realized this, I knew that Pasha's was going to be a success.

I hear you guys have some high profile customers as well.

Well one thing that has really made Pasha's so successful is that we have had the local trendsetters as regular costumers since the beginning. They still eat here till this day. We also get a lot of famous people. They really do feel comfortable here and have kind of made Pasha's their home. We have actors, singers, fashion designers, models,

basketball players, politicians, television celebrities... you just name it. And it's really funny because their trainers actually bring them here to eat and they get hooked.

You're food is so healthy; it's even been featured in The South Beach Diet. How did that happen?

I believe in life that when you do the right things, good things will come to you. We didn't go after Dr. Agatston. He discovered us on his own, and we went to dinner with him and his wife. At the beginning of dinner they said their book was closed, but by the end of dinner they asked if Pasha's would like to be included. We initially thought they were just being nice, but on Monday we got a call from New York. The publisher was asking us for permission to use our recipe. We couldn't believe it. This was the beginning of our relationship with The South Beach Diet. The great thing about the Mediterranean diet is that it does fit into the different diets. Whether it's Atkins, South Beach, or Zone among many, many more, you really have a variety of dishes here. The food by itself is healthy. There're no preservatives, no trans fats, no additives, and no MSG, so it's just very healthy.

What are some of the other projects you guys are working on?

We are currently working with the University of Miami at their wellness center at Jackson Memorial. It is a dream space. The good thing is that the wellness center focuses on living a healthy lifestyle. We'll be working with nutritionists, doctors, and nurses to promote not just the physical activity, but also a healthy lifestyle by eating food that is good for you. That should open by the end of February.

Anything you really want Wire readers to know about Pasha's?

Everyone should know that you can come to Pasha's with a jacket and tie or in shorts and flip flops. Some people like to eat on plastic and some people ask us to cater with nice dishes, so Pasha's is the kind of food that transcends all of those things. You can take it on the run or you can have it in a formal setting. Another thing that's important for all of your readers to know is that we are here to support the local community. We love South Beach and love our local customers even more.

"The great thing ABOUT THE Mediterranean DIET IS THAT IT does fit into the DIFFERENT DIETS."

