



Jackie Mercandetti

# The King

BY JOHN M. GLIONNA

**S**o, I was hanging out the other day with my old pal Vinny the Pizza Guy.

Vincent Mineo lives in Mesa but grew up in Buffalo, New York, a place he considers the pizza capital of America, if not the planet, where scarfing down what the locals call “pizza pie” is as natural and necessary as breathing. Or shoveling snow.

Let me tell you something about Vinny: At 72, with his shoulder-length white hair, he looks like some Italian Santa Claus who lives for rolling dough and stirring sauces. He’s a second-generation pizza man who opened his first shop, Vince’s Pizzeria, in 1965. Over the next half-century, he ran six pizza shops in western New York and later in Phoenix, before finally throwing in his apron a few years ago.

On that morning in Mesa, I don’t think I’d ever seen him so excited, and here’s why: Vinny the Pizza Guy is back in the game.

“John, come in here,” he said, walking into his home office like a banker entering a Swiss vault. On a table were mailing boxes and packets of seasoning. He beamed. “My new business.”

Along with his partner, Ottavio Tassielli, another paizan who looks like he walked straight off the set of *Godfather 3*, Vinnie has taken on an unlikely project: He’s launching a small startup, selling spices for

**Vincent “Vinny the Pizza Guy” Mineo pops a pie in the oven while his Casa D’Erba partner, Ottavio Tassielli, looks on.**

Italian sauces, ready to take on the big boys like Hunt’s and Heinz.

They’re calling the venture Casa D’Erba, or “House of Herbs.” The name was Tass’ idea. One of his goombah cousins thought it sounded old school, even though everyone pronounces it a different way. But there’s no confusion about the product: “Vinny’s Signature” seasonings for marinara and pizza sauce, salad dressing, and bread dip are the real deal.

The packets, which make up to 10 servings each, feature a cartoon version of Vinny with his white beard wearing a chef’s hat and red apron. It makes me hungry just looking at it.

Despite long odds, Vinnie is determined to become “the king,” what he calls everyone who stakes his own claim in the Italian food universe: (“The guy’s the king of Parmesan cheese!”)

And you know something? He just might make it. Because Vinny’s product is something different: It contains a family secret — his father Vinny’s spice recipe for the Italian sauces he made back in the day. It’s a formula he wouldn’t even divulge to his son until late in life. He wouldn’t even give it up to all those well-dressed made guys in the old neighborhood. (That’s probably not true, but it sounds so like Buffalo.)

Growing up, Vinny’s best friend was Neil Downey, my sister’s late husband. One day, the two were minding the old man’s pizza shop, rolling dough and slapping on sauce, when Neil looked over. “Greek,” he said, using an old nickname, “We’re out of sauce.”

Before the boys could panic, Vinny’s father walked in and saved the day. He went into the back cooler and calmly mixed up a new batch of sauce. Eventually, Vinny used that same recipe in his own kitchen.

And now he’s going public with it. “It’s authentic,” he said. “It’s Italian.”

Vinny had a long road back to doing what he loves: cooking. For years, after he sold his Phoenix pizza joint, he’d scour the newspaper classified ads for pizza >> p 32

shops up for sale. It was a perverse game: He’d fantasize about buying in, knowing in his heart he was no longer into the long hours and sleep deprivation.

A few years ago, I accompanied Vinny to an event he considers bigger than the Olympics: the three-day International Pizza Expo in Las Vegas. Vinny insisted he wanted to scout out a few potential business leads, but I knew better: He wanted to breathe in the expo’s sights and smells, the spicy scent of salami, roasted peppers, and white wheels of Parmesan cheese, strolling along a red carpet the color of a nice Bolognese sauce.

For hours, we walked through the crowded convention floor as Vinny spouted wisdom from six decades in the game. He preferred metal pizza paddles he said were easier to slide under the pie. He liked sauce that wasn’t too sweet, something with a little kick.

He sampled a frozen pizza. “My uncle had the idea for frozen pizza in the 1950s,” he said between chews. “He was ahead of his time. If he hadn’t died, he would have been the king.”

Fast-forward two years. Vinny and Tass had a lot of decisions to make, knowing that in their 70s it’s tough to crack the market in a city as big as Phoenix. Tass, who once fled the garbage business in New Jersey after being threatened by the mob, late worked in public relations. He asked around. The pair hired a consultant, found a company to package their product.

They also started a website, [www.casaderba.com](http://www.casaderba.com), which features a picture of Vinny with his granddaughter and soon will include his favorite recipes. It refers to him as “nonno,” or “grandfather.” There’s also a link to a cause for wounded veterans to which Vinny — a U.S. Air Force veteran — is donating some of his proceeds.

The other day, Vinny and the Tass Man sat outside A.J.’s in Gilbert, where they like to go and drink coffee and talk about their dreams. They’d made some progress getting their product on the shelves of such small groceries as Romanelli’s and Guido’s Chicago Deli.

They had already hit both places to hand out free samples. The consultant considers Tass his cross to bear, a loose cannon whose wacky ideas he must keep in line. Outside the grocery store, Tass considered hiring some sexy young women to give their sauce pitch some pizzazz, but in the end they decided their company image should remain true to its roots: two old Italian guys peddling authentic sauce seasonings.

The night before, I sat in Vinny’s kitchen as he whipped up a pie, just like the old days. I remember going to Vinny’s pizzeria back in south Buffalo, diving into an extra large pepperoni pizza and an order of spicy wings, telling him: “When I eat your pizza, my eyes are making love to you wings. When I eat the wings, I’m thinking about the pizza.”

In his Mesa kitchen he served up a simple pie. I took a bite. Pizza heaven.

I felt like a king.



casaderba.com