



LARRY DiPASQUALE
FOUNDER AND MANAGING PARTNER
OF EPICUREAN CATERING

“I DON’T KNOW WHO’S ON TOP. BUT I KNOW WHEN WE SEE PEOPLE COME TO US TIME IN AND TIME OUT OVER 20 YEARS, THINGS MIGHT BE GOING RIGHT.”

MANGIA!

A FINE ATTENTION TO DETAIL AND A LOT OF ITALIAN LUCK ARE KEY INGREDIENTS IN LARRY DIPASQUALE'S RECIPE FOR SUCCESS.

Pope John Paul II visits Denver for World Youth Day in August of 1993. President Bill Clinton meets with world leaders at the 1997 Denver Summit of the Eight. Senator Barack Obama accepts the Democratic presidential nomination at Invesco Field in 2008. What these historic events have in common is more than the eyes of the world focused on the Mile High City. Behind the scenes, they had Larry DiPasquale.

It's likely no coincidence that, since 1722, St. Pasquale de Baylon has been considered the saint protector of cooks, and in the 28 years Epicurean Catering has been in existence, DiPasquale has more than once been called the king of his profession in Denver. Italian kids just seem to grow up knowing food, regardless of the century. "I grew up watching my grandmother and my aunt cook," DiPasquale says, "and a lot of our recipes here are a combination of some of those things that I saw as a kid."

After college, DiPasquale took a job at Harrah's Hotel and Casino in Lake Tahoe, at the time the epitome of five-star service in the casino industry. He began moving up the ladder in the food and beverage department at a hotel with 28 food outlets, serving an average of 10,000 people per shift. Those 18-hour days, he says, were worth the education he received: "They sent you through general manager school, they sent you through a culinary program, they sent you through five-star tableside service. Harrah's

taught us that every light had to be perfect, every plate had to be perfect." DiPasquale shares that work ethic and rigorous attention to the smallest details with the young professionals at Epicurean. "I tell kids that come through here, 'when you're young, you've got to come in, and you've got to put the time in and have the dedication to learn this industry.'"

That education didn't stop when he moved to Denver and launched Epicurean. "I said, 'My father's an entrepreneur who owned his own business for 30 years; my uncles are entrepreneurs, and I kind of thought I was ready.'" He laughs at the self-assurance of a young man who couldn't have known what he was getting into. "Harrah's taught me so much, but what they didn't teach me was how to make money," he says. "Because it's a casino, the food service and the liquor and the entertainment all just complemented the gaming." The first few years of Epicurean were filled with details of another kind. "You have to know what a sugar packet costs. You didn't need to know that stuff in a \$32 million casino business."

At that time, Le Petit Gourmet was the caterer of note in Denver. DiPasquale says, "They had the market share, and I was just the young kid on the block. That was always a good barometer for me to say we are slowly catching up with what they do. I always felt we did it better, but the key in business is communicating that to your clients."

Modesty aside, the business has clearly grown. DiPasquale cites a time when the competition was at about \$4 million in sales for the year. "When we hit our \$4 million in sales," which he says the company has since quadrupled and more, "that was a great turning point." Currently, "I don't know who's on top," he says, "but I know when we see people come to us time in and time out over 20 years, things might be going right."

DiPasquale credits relationship-building as one key tenet of his longevity in this very people-oriented business. That and an ability to listen to what his clients want and suss out what they need. He tells the story of a woman planning a Bar Mitzvah for her son with whom Epicurean scheduled 26 different tastings over the course of a year before the event menu was finalized. "The catering business," he says, "is all about that word: catering." Ten years ago, businesswoman and philanthropist Sharon Magness Blake, a long-time client, became a partner in Epicurean Culinary Group, cementing another valued relationship.

Another key point is a commitment to community service: "If the communities embrace us, we certainly should give back," DiPasquale says. This devotion is exemplified by his 24-year involvement with the Rocky Mountain Adoption Exchange, but that, too, had humble beginnings. "I always remember that first event, the Fantasy Ball that we went to. [My wife] Jill and I couldn't really afford the ticket, and we were walking around the auction, just hoping we could buy something and contribute," he says. In 2002, the DiPasquale family, which also includes Christina (17) and Matthew (15), received the organization's highest honor, the Wednesday's Child Award. DiPasquale supports Jill's charities as she supports his; she was voted Woman of the Year by The Leukemia & Lymphoma Society in 2008.

Other awards have followed. *Colorado Meetings + Events* magazine recently inducted DiPasquale into its hall of fame, as did the Colorado Restaurant Association. The trade publication *Special Events* included Epicurean on its 2009 list of "25 Great, Big Caterers," which culls top companies worldwide. But while clearly proud and appreciative of the recognition, DiPasquale remains focused on the day-to-day tasks. "I never really cared how big we were going to be; I just was always very passionate about how good our clients' experience was going to be," he says. "Certainly we've been blessed and honored to win awards over the years, but we still run our business."

BY DANA R. BUTLER