



Panago's first downtown Toronto franchisee, Anton Pitlevany.

Photo courtesy Panago

An Urban Success Story
By Kristine Archer

When Anton Pitlevany opened his Panago Pizza franchise in April 2007, he knew he was entering uncharted waters.

While his was not the first Panago location in Ontario, it was the Western franchisor's first store in downtown Toronto, presenting the first-time entrepreneur and long-time chef with some unique opening challenges.

"Panago is still an emerging name in Ontario and lower brand awareness can be a challenge," Pitlevany explains. "I address this by educating my customers on what I believe sets Panago apart from our competitors, like the quality of our products."

Food has always been a passion for Pitlevany, who earned his master's degree from the Italian Culinary Institute for Foreigners, along with diplomas in culinary arts and hotel and restaurant operations. Before his foray into franchising, he worked as a station chef (*chef de partie*) at the Toronto Marriott Hotel.

While his thoughts often drifted to entrepreneurship, Pitlevany knew he needed an extra boost to make his dream a reality.

"The food industry is really competitive," he explains. "I had the culinary knowledge but lacked the business experience needed to run a company. Panago offered me the tools I needed to succeed."

Having lived in Toronto most of his life, Pitlevany knew the market's potential—though he did have some initial reservations.

"I know how much energy and buzz there is in the city," he says.

"I knew the constant hustle and bustle would provide a great opportunity to build a strong customer base. However, in Ontario, and Toronto specifically, people are used to grabbing a slice of pizza at lunch or after work. We don't offer slices as part of our menu, so I was concerned people wouldn't want to wait to get a personal pizza made to order."

Despite those initial worries, Pitlevany's location now sells more personal-size pizzas in the lunch period than any other Panago store chain-wide.

"It's pretty clear customers are willing to wait five or 10 minutes when they know they're getting a good product," he says.

Pitlevany says one of the keys to his success has been taking ultimate responsibility for his store's achievements and failures.

"Panago has lots of great systems in place for new franchisees, but being the first urban store in Toronto, it was important for me to really understand my market," he explains, adding some words of wisdom for fellow first-time franchisees.

"Expect the first couple of years to be a challenge," he says. "Opening a franchise is a long-term investment and you can't expect to make money right away. It requires a lot of hard work and dedication. Do your homework when choosing a franchisor. Get to know their philosophy, personality and goals to ensure they fit with what you want." **fe**