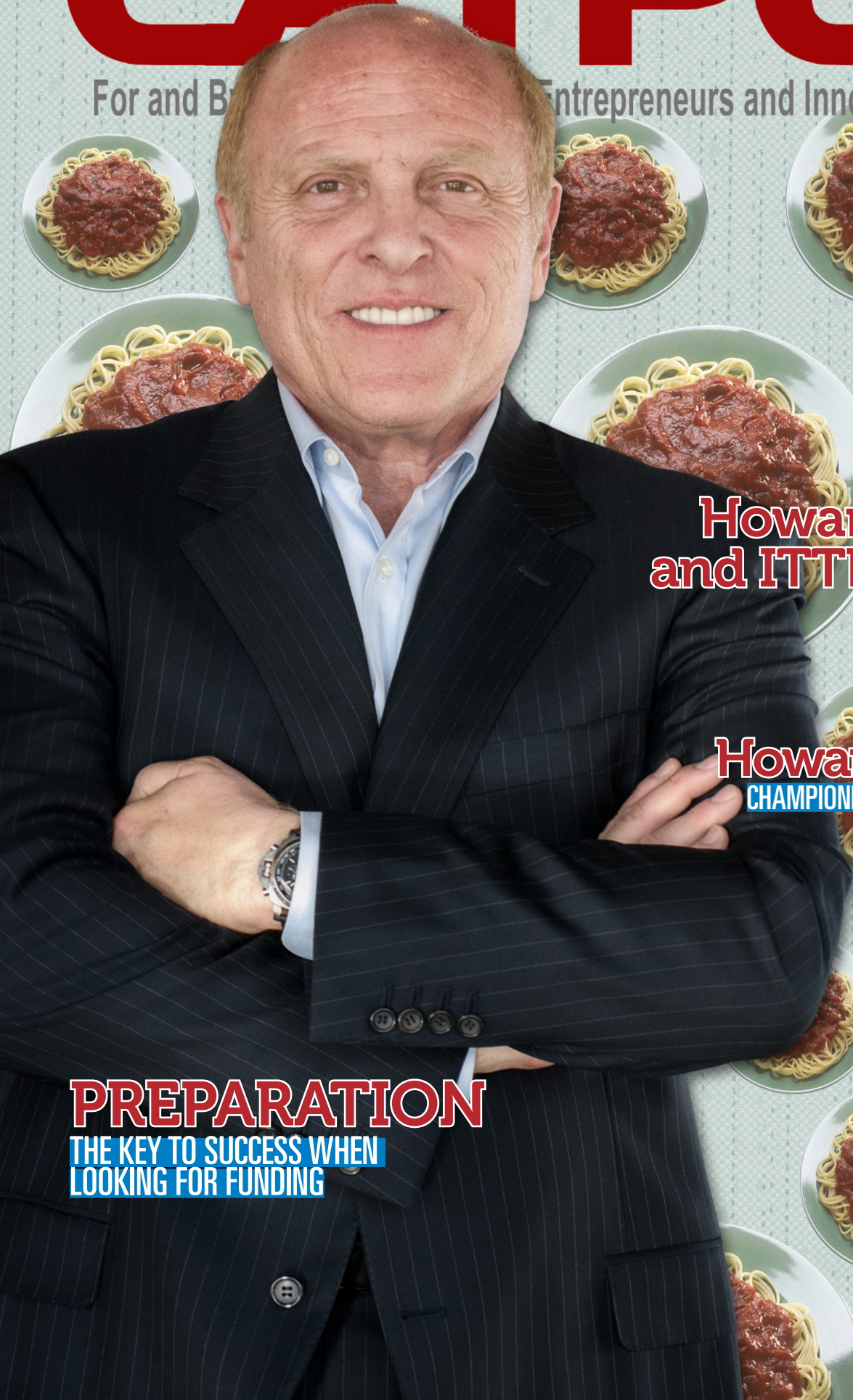


# CAYPEN

For and By Entrepreneurs and Innovators



**Howard Gordon  
and ITTRIYA CAFE**

**A TELLING CONCEPT**

**Howard Leohardt**

**CHAMPIONING STARTUP AMERICA AND  
INVESTMENT LAW REFORM**

**THREE FAIRY TALES AND  
AN ACTION THRILLER**

**THREE STEADFAST KEYS  
TO FUNDING SUCCESS**

**PREPARATION**

**THE KEY TO SUCCESS WHEN  
LOOKING FOR FUNDING**

**VISSION WITHOUT  
EXECUTION IS NOTHING**



# Howard Gordon and Itriya Café

COVER  
STORY

*A Telling Concept*

*By Mike Dahl*

*Photo by Don Haynes*



Every business has a story and often that tale is very integral to its vitality, which Howard Gordon, a restaurateur who was instrumental in the remarkable success of the Cheesecake Factory restaurants and is now fronting his own burgeoning bistro, can well attest to.

*Photo by Don Haynes*

After all, an interesting yarn can delight, engage, and inspire and when it's a good old-fashioned account of American ingenuity and industriousness, it can translate into loyal customers and a profitable enterprise.

Gordon experienced this at the Cheesecake Factory and is now watching it unfold at his restaurant, Itriya Cafe.

"I think that it is a big part of it," says Gordon, "

a story that people can relate to."

He is quick to point out though that you can't make it up. It comes from hard work, diligence, creativity and good fortune.

Take the tale of the Cheesecake Factory restaurants, which trace their roots to the Detroit home of Oscar and Evelyn Overton where Evelyn baked her beloved cheesecakes to be delivered to several of the best local restaurants.

In 1972, the Overtons moved their business to Los Angeles where, with the last of their savings, they opened a 700 square foot store and named it The Cheesecake Factory. Thanks to 18-hour days and a first-rate product, their reputation and sales quickly grew and the Overtons expanded.

In 1978, their son David launched the first Cheesecake Factory restaurant. Through intuition and resolve, he created a superb din-

ing experience – generous portions of freshly made selections from an inventive menu served in a casual and comfortable setting.

When Gordon came on board, there were only about a dozen Cheesecake Factory restaurants. It was, in his words, “a small company doing big numbers.” As senior vice president for business development and marketing, Gordon helped manage and build the brand and create new concepts. He also became the face of the company on television interviews and at restaurant openings.

“Every opening in every city I would invite the mayor and local news stations,” says Gordon. “It was a great way to connect with the community.”

Building that connection was central to increasing brand awareness and loyalty. So much so that Gordon never spent any money on advertising.

“Instead of just spending money on an ad that 30% of the people may see once and then throw away, I want people to feel a part of what we are doing,” Gordon states. “You have to get the people in the neighborhood to feel good about a restaurant coming into their home. People wondered why we were opening a desert restaurant but once we invited them to come in and see the menu, see that it was much more than that, it really connected. We started getting well known and people wanted us to be in their cities.”

All the while, the company never lost its original focus. At the front of each restaurant is a bakery case with over 30 different cheesecakes. When Gordon left after 12 years, the company owned 150 establishments.

“That was a once in a lifetime opportunity for someone in the hospitality industry,” says Gordon. “But I wanted to do something more.”

His first venture was the Gordon Restaurant Group, a consulting firm for hospitality-based businesses. Gordon used his years of experience to help others in the industry elevate their brands and create new concepts.

In addition, he considered opening his own restaurant because as he admits, he loves the business and he loves a challenge. And in 2011, Gordon and his fiancée, Jenny Lee, a top fashion designer in the wedding gown industry, opened Itriya. And a new story began to unfold.

“Itriya is the first known word for pasta,” Gordon says. “We use spaghetti as our main noodle, which is known all over the world. With it, we have 21 sauces that are Italian, Asian and Latino-inspired. There’s no place that you can go and have all this variety, all these flavors. I wanted to break down cultural barriers in food.”

Another distinctive part of their menu is ssam, a Korean appetizer consisting of various meats, shrimp or tofu, layered with rice, piquant vegetables and chili sauce, wrapped in a lettuce leaf.

Gordon and Lee also set out to craft a unique ambience. Lee designed the restaurant including the lighting, the floor to ceiling glass and the exterior flora, which includes cacti that help impart the Joshua tree theme that she created. Gordon retells that part of the story.

“When we were building the kitchen, with all the stainless steel, Jenny said that it looked like a spaceship landing in your backyard. So the idea was to bring nature into the restaurant with wood, marble and natural colors, so it made even the stainless steel warm.”

The ambience is also strategic as it was designed to appeal to women and children who, according to Gordon, are the chief decision-makers when it comes to eating out.

Innovation also plays a big role in Itriya’s narrative. This includes a digital kiosk to expedite takeout orders and a pasta cooker that Gordon and Lee designed and patented.

“In the hospitality industry, everybody cooks pasta pretty much the same way,” explains Gordon. “It’s in the same water all the time. When you use the same water, it makes your pasta water salty. Also there is a lot of starch in there. At home you’re only using the water once. So we have made a pasta cooker that each time you cook an order, you dump it out, a new order goes in and you start again. It can cook upwards to 90 portions of pasta in ten minutes. It’s just very

unique in the industry. "

One thing that Gordon held on to from his Cheesecake Factory experience is his aversion to paid advertising: instead again relying on personal contact with the community and what he refers to as "old-fashioned guerilla marketing" to promote his business.

"People come in and have a great time," says Gordon. "Then they tell 10 other people."

And nothing beats hard work to get his story out there.

"I'm here at the restaurant from open to close everyday right now," Gordon relates. "And I do what I call touch every table, every guest. I talk to them, see how they're doing and explain the concept. It took a little while for people to get it but now they have and we have a lot of repeat customers."

Having experience in the corporate world, Gordon can draw upon a lot of resources that many successful restaurateurs may not have. But the differences between that world and the entrepreneurial world keep him on his toes.

"It's a little more stressful," admits Gordon. "You have to be really hands-on. My executive meetings are in the mirror as opposed to having 12 people help me decide what to do."

But because of that, Gordon acknowledges that he can make adjustments quickly. One ex-

ample occurred two weeks after opening. The original plan was for customers to order at the counter, take a seat and have the food brought to them. Lee and Gordon noticed that there was a lot of confusion. They concluded that for their typical

"Guests want a great experience," he says. "You have to have good food, good service, interesting ambience. You have to have a location that is easy to find. And at least for me, you have to have something on the menu for everyone."



guests – families, women getting together for lunches or dinners, dating couples, large parties, office workers out to lunch, it would be more conducive to have sit-down service. Gordon recounts what happened.

"We decided on a Friday night that we would start it the next day. Something like that is very difficult to do but we all worked together as a team to make it happen. It was the best thing that we could have ever done."

In spite of the differences in his two career experiences, Gordon also finds similarities.

Like all entrepreneurs, Gordon is taking risks. In his case it includes offering guests a menu that they are not familiar with. But with the risks come the rewards of having loyal customers and great reviews.

Gordon and Lee's future plans include adding restaurants and possibly franchising their concept. They are looking for investors who believe in their vision of bringing this unique dining experience; ethnic cuisine that is approachable for all, to more areas.

As Gordon explains, "This is



about having a place in your neighborhood that you are comfortable with, that your kids like, with food that is delicious and you can understand.”

Gordon and Lee also plan to refine their patented pasta cooker, making it smaller and more mobile, and then make it available to the industry.

Gordon still consults; especially helping U.S. companies sell brands and foods and beverages to Asia, and helping companies in Asia do the same to the U.S. And he is giving back to the industry by serving on the board of advisors for the Collins College of Hospitality at Cal Poly Pomona.

When asked for his recipe for success, Gordon cites the need for action.

“A lot of people have ideas,” he says, “and then there are people that do something about it. When you have an idea for a concept, you have to continue to work on it every day. Whenever you think that you’re at the finish line, the gun goes off again. My recipe also includes: having great people around you that support you in doing what you love, and building relationships.”

And it never hurts to have an appealing story.

“When people go by our place,” Gordon states, “they stop and ask questions: how do you pronounce Itriya, what does it mean, what is ssam, what are the sauces. We have a story and people like to know the story. And once they get it, they don’t forget it.”

In an epilogue to this article, shortly after this interview took place, Gordon and Lee decided to make another adjustment by changing the location of their restaurant and thus begin a new chapter in Itriya’s story.

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