

Up from marinara sauce

AS A SIX-YEAR-OLD, Jimmy Rubino wanted nothing more than to work in Ralph's, the legendary South Philadelphia restaurant (and Frank Sinatra hangout) founded by Jimmy's great-grandparents, Francesco and Catherine Dispigno, in 1900. Jimmy begged his parents and uncles to put him to work 32 years ago, but "the old-time, temperamental Italian chefs wouldn't let me

in the kitchen," he recalls. Jimmy was allowed to bus tables until finally, at the advanced age of nine, he was admitted to the kitchen. There he carefully watched everything the chefs did. Eventually his mother and uncles handed Jimmy an apron and began teaching him family recipes. He became a full-fledged cook by age 13, and he signed on full-time right after high school.

"I was born for this business," says Jimmy, now a part owner with his brother, his moth-

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er and an uncle. "Never has a day gone by that I didn't view this restaurant as my destiny."

Yet about seven years ago his enthusiasm began to wane. The mystique of mixing 80-year-old recipes for marinara sauce had worn thin. The restaurant's 100th

Jimmy turned to a slew of new projects. He began planning a second restaurant, a 100th anniversary celebration, a cookbook and a quarterly newsletter for customers.

His first step for the centennial celebration was to hire a PR professional who inspired Jimmy to go beyond the usual parties and press releases. Instead, Ralph's Restaurant began sponsoring a series of community fund-raising events, such as cooking demonstrations and formal sit-down dinners for local and national charities. A golf tournament sponsored by the restaurant netted \$8,000 after expenses and lured more



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—Jimmy Rubino
Ralph's Italian Restaurant
Philadelphia

anniversary was approaching, and Jimmy yearned to celebrate it by expanding in new directions. But working 60-plus hours a week for 20 years, dealing with employee issues and administrative trivia, sapped the time and energy he needed to implement his longer-term visions. "It was frustrating," he remembers.

So Jimmy learned to delegate responsibility. First he hired Ronald Trombino, a non-family manager. Then Jimmy's older brother Eddie, now 42, rejoined the business after working some ten years as an emergency-room nurse. What seemed old and repetitive to Jimmy was new and challenging to them. With Trombino and brother Eddie on board,

than 100 golfers. "Every vendor signed on as a sponsor, as did many customers who had their own businesses," Jimmy boasts.

As for the cookbook, "For years I wanted to sit down at a computer and write all our family recipes. I was the first one to write them down." Jimmy says it took him six months to write the book, including translating the family's oral recipe for pasta sauce (which he had whipped up from 20 cases of tomatoes for the restaurant) into a recipe suitable for four to six servings. The cookbook was published in late 2000. Jimmy's recipe for delegation might be harder for other business owners to whip up.