

Nonno Rana's Story: Family, Intuitions and Little Secrets

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In conversation with the founder of Pastificio Rana, where family tradition meets innovation.

For Italians, [Giovanni Rana](#) [2] is not just an entrepreneur, the founder of [Pastificio Rana](#) [3], and a world leader in the market for fresh pasta. For many generations, especially for children, he represents so much more. He's a popular television personality who, through his advertisements that were particularly effective in their spontaneity, was able to not only promote his products but also to bring them into Italian households. He's the image of the grandfather you always wished for. We met with him at his restaurant in New York City's [Chelsea Market](#) [4]. Upon speaking to him, we were transported back in time to Italy. We realized we were not only speaking with the businessman, but also with a bright, cheerful grandfather figure.

Need for a change

Giovanni Rana is man who is proud of his origins in [Cologna Veneta](#) [5], in the lower portion of the Province of Verona. After he lost his father Gaetano when he was 11, Giovanni continued to go to school for a couple of years before starting practice in his older brothers' bakery, where he learned



how to make bread.

"I was the youngest of three boys," Giovanni recalls, "We used to make great bread. But by the time I turned 22, I knew that I had to do something else. My mom Teresa always said, 'Why change careers? You already learned to make bread. You're ready to get yourself your own oven!' But I knew I needed a change, and I would tell her, 'I'm going to make fresh pasta and tortellini!'"

A great intuition and a close family

Around the late 1950s, Giovanni realized that Italy's lifestyle was undergoing tremendous change. "Most women started to go out to work and they didn't have much time to cook," he tells us. "So I created a fresh pasta that could be made quickly but that maintained the quality of a homemade product. It was much appreciated; it became a great success." And this is how his adventure began. It was the 1960s, and a fresh pasta industry was a novelty. It started in Italy and then it expanded.

But there was one fundamental ingredient in his success, a typical Italian ingredient—a close family. "First, my wife helped me, and we were pretty successful. Afterwards, my son, who had just finished his studies, took charge of the business. With his help, we were able to grow our business abroad, especially in America. It's all thanks to him." Here is how the story went. Twenty years after they started, Giovanni and his wife were leading their market. "We had a

beautiful little factory, and there were always more and more studies saying that Italians were eating fresh pasta. All of the big-named business owners, starting with Pietro Barilla, came to visit my business to see if I intended to sell it. Many multinational corporations came to me, and I always told them, 'I'm absolutely never selling my business.' My accountant used to say, 'You're insane! You could make so much money...'"

Giovanni was right once again, for in those years his son Gianluca, who was just finishing school, realized he had a great passion for his father's work. And he would turn out to be his family's ace in the hole. "We held on to the business, and it was a great success!"

Making his own commercials

Another peculiar intuition of Giovanni's was to create his own advertising campaign and to star in it. "I wanted to make my own commercials. I didn't necessarily want to be an actor," the businessman says with a smile, "But I firmly believed in my product, so I was the one who had to promote it. I went on TV myself, and I said, 'Ladies and gentlemen look! Eat and relax because I am the one responsible for this product!'" And so a new character was born, one who was to be beloved by generations of TV viewers—Nonno Rana, or Grandpa Rana—a charming grandfather known for his sweetness and his attention to his grandchildren.

If you watch some of his first ads, as well as the more recent ones, you'll see that Giovanni had another stroke of genius: the use of irony. "Look, food is joy; it's happiness. Therefore, a food commercial needs to be happy. Here, in the United States, I found a great director in my daughter-in-law Antonella. She is a master of irony. She likes liveliness, so we made very ironic commercials."

Family again. Let's talk about [Antonella \[6\]](#), who is the cornerstone of their success in New York. "Antonella - Gianluca's wife - became part of the Rana family 14 years ago, and she is a blessing for us because she comes from a family of hoteliers. She already had experience in catering, which was extremely helpful with the launch of our store here in New York."

"But she also became your art director?" we ask. "Yes, Antonella has great sensibility. She understands me because I'm not an actor; she knows my limits and knows what I am capable of... She says I'm a great actor, and I say that she's a great director."

Some other little secrets

But let's return to the Rana products that are distributed all over the United States and the world. "Today we make 180 different types of fillings, something for everyone: the Americans, the Spanish, the English, etc... It's important to understand your consumer because not everybody has the same taste. Inside this package..." says Giovanni holding a package of tortellini Rana in his hand, "there is



our best work, our passion. You need to be a gourmand to appreciate this. My 100kg are 100kg of great quality." One wonders how important it is, for a leader of the food industry, to eat well himself. And here is what Nonno Rana has to say: "I always say that I eat with pleasure. I know how to eat and to determine foods of high quality, and I want it to be this way. It's a great joy because food, like I said before, is joy. But above all the consumer needs to be respected, in America like in Italy. They need to know and understand what they're eating, and we are the ones responsible for explaining it to them."

But when testing a new type of pasta, who tastes it first? And who decides? "I have a qualified staff that does it before the launch, young experts. Next they have the old boss taste it: 'let's see what he says,' and then I give my verdict." In other words, Giovanni is always right? Not necessarily, he admits. "Sometimes I have my doubts about certain products, but they end up working out fine. I always said that my taste is not representative of everyone's."

Discovering (and conquering) America

What does America represent for Grandpa Rana? "Well, in America I discovered a truly new world. I never thought I would have this kind of success here. My son Gianluca always said, 'Look, in America they don't have products like ours.' Almost everyone else was skeptical, 'Americans eat hamburgers,' they said. But a few years later we were selling like crazy!" So your ultimate secret is—good and genuine, yet fast to prepare? "Absolutely! At last, Italian food can be eaten quickly every day, without spending too much time in the kitchen. We have a product that cooks in a few minutes. Once upon a time, ravioli used to take 20 minutes to cook; today they can be ready in 2-3 minutes. We make a very light dough. What's good for the Italians is good for the Americans!"

Click [here](#) [7] to see the interview made at Giovanni Rana Pastificio & Cucina by i-Italy.

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