

Eatery survives by making dough

Sisters 'take a million baby steps' to overcome business mistakes

BY EVELYN LEE

THE ODDS WERE against sisters **Fusun, Gonca** and **Arzu Esendemir** in March 2008, when they

makingit opened **Flatbread Grill**, in Montclair.

The biggest warning may have been from their father, a Turkish immigrant and former restaurateur. "When he heard that we were opening this place, he said, 'I don't know if you girls really want to go into the restaurant business. It's one of the most difficult businesses to get into,'" said Arzu, 26. And in the middle of a recession, his words of advice were: "This is not the time to open a restaurant."

Although they had worked in their parents' restaurants when they were growing up, the Esendemirs had a lot to learn when it came to owning and operating their own business. "We had to take a million baby steps," said Gonca, 28. "We made a lot of mistakes along the way."

For example, when the sisters first rented their space in a former **Carvel** ice cream store on 204 Bellevue Ave., in the township's Upper Montclair section, they weren't aware the building was in a historical district, which compli-



Flatbread Grill's hummus is made of mashed chickpeas and sesame seasoned with garlic, and is served with 'thumb bread,' which is kneaded with the thumbs.

cated renovations. They ended up paying about \$70,000 in rent for 13 months before opening, said Fusun, 34. "If we had gone about it a different way, we would have saved that money, and things would have moved along faster."

Other missteps included purchasing unneeded equipment and not being prepared to serve a huge crowd at their grand opening.

"It was overwhelming, and we weren't ready for it," Gonca said. "We didn't get to retain a lot of customers, because you have one impression to make."



From left, sisters Fusun, Arzu and Gonca Esendemir in their Flatbread Grill, a Turkish-Mediterranean restaurant they opened in Upper Montclair. The trio overcame a series of mistakes and is now planning to expand with a Hoboken location.

But the young entrepreneurs overcame those challenges and built a loyal following with their affordable Turkish-Mediterranean-inspired food — salads, sandwiches and pizzas made or served with one of eight varieties of flatbreads — and their "fresh casual" concept. The flatbreads are baked fresh daily by a part-time Turkish baker, while the Esendemirs purchase fresh meat and produce on a daily basis, and make all of the food to order.

"We were looking for a way to make it accessible to people who didn't understand what Turkish food is," Gonca said. "We wanted to make sure that we were going to appeal to everyone."

The bulk of the restaurant's marketing has been through word of mouth; some of Flatbread's most devoted customers have been local tweens and teens, who visit the restaurant during their lunch hour or after school, and have in turn introduced their friends and parents to the establishment. The sisters have looked to students — who make up about 35 percent of Flatbread's customer base — to test potential menu additions, and last fall ran a contest for area students to design a new staff T-shirt.

With the exception of the part-time baker, the sisters do all of the work. "The promotional stuff on the tables, I do at 3 a.m., when I have a chance when I get home," Gonca said.

When times got tough, the Esendemirs — who saw sales drop by 45 percent last winter —

NJBIZ.com extra

The Esendemir sisters discuss their expansion hopes for a new city and the pre-production schedule for a planned reality show, exclusively at www.njbiz.com.

cut costs by removing ketchup bottles from the tables and serving their french fries with one-ounce rations of the condiment, and installed napkin dispensers that allowed customers to take only one at a time. They focused on just getting their monthly bills paid, rather than how much they were making.

The sisters also made numerous menu changes, getting rid of items that were more costly or less popular. "Now everything on our menu moves and makes a profit," Gonca said.

Being a family-run operation was also critical to weathering the recession, Fusun said. "That factored into what helped us survive here," she said. Employees need to be paid every week, but as co-owners, "if you can't get money for the week, too bad."

They are now preparing to open a second location in their hometown of Hoboken in 2012. "These past couple of years have given us the opportunity to work out all the kinks," Gonca said. With the new restaurant, "we'll be ready." ♦

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SBA Loans in New Jersey

Small Business Administration loans to New Jersey businesses rose 28 percent in the four months ended Jan. 31. **Jim Kocsi**, New Jersey district director for the SBA, gives much of the credit to enhancements to SBA programs financed by the federal stimulus legislation. Those funds have run out, and the SBA is now asking Congress for new money to continue those programs.

375

Total number of New Jersey Loans*

20,864

Total number of U.S. Loans*

* For four months ended Jan. 31

Following are the top 10 SBA lenders in New Jersey in the four months ended Jan. 31.

TD Bank America's Most Convenient Bank®	56 Loans ▲ 1
BNB	23 Loans ▼ 6
PNC LEADING THE WAY	21 Loans ▲ 13
New Jersey Business Finance Corp. professional, predictable, timely results NJ's #1 SBA 504 Lender	20 Loans ▲ 6
SUPERIOR FINANCIAL GROUP	20 Loans ▲ 15
CHASE	19 Loans ▲ 12
Regional Business Assistance Corporation The capital source for business	17 Loans ▲ 12
Indus American Bank	15 Loans ▲ 13
BankAsiana highest standard of service excellence	14 Loans ▲ 5
IB innovativebank	14 Loans ▼ 15

Source: U.S. Small Business Administration

Small-Business Opportunities

PROGRAM:

SCORE is a national association of experienced businesspeople who volunteer advice through small-business workshops. SCORE is funded by the U.S. Small Business Administration.

DESCRIPTION:

New Jersey has nine SCORE chapters with

about 40 offices throughout the state.

Counseling is available by appointment. New Jersey has about 250 volunteer counselors, and e-mail counseling is offered by volunteers nationwide.

CONTACT:

www.score.org

ELIGIBILITY:

SCORE counselors will provide individual counseling to existing businesses and to individuals looking for advice before launching a new venture.

DEADLINES:

Counseling is available by appointment, and chapters also run seminars and workshops at various times throughout the year.

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