

How This Founder Is Sharing the Immigrant Story Through Food – And Her Best Advice for Entrepreneurs

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Immigrant Food is a restaurant group with its flagship location nestled in the heart of Washington, D.C., just steps away from the White House. It celebrates global flavors brought to America by immigrants while challenging the immigrant narrative in America. Owner Téa Ivanovic calls it “gastroadvocacy.”

“The idea of Immigrant Food really was to celebrate immigrants and their contributions through food and all the amazing recipes and spices and flavors that immigrants have been bringing for centuries to America – but also at a time where there’s a lot of division,” Ivanovic says. “There’s a lot of polarization in our country.”

For many businesses, the mission statement is personal. Ivanovic and her business partner, Peter Schechter, are both immigrants and in 2018, they wanted to challenge the rhetoric around American immigrants. That’s how Immigrant Food was born. “We just didn’t recognize the country that we were in,” she says. “So we wanted to do something really tangible to try and be a small part in that fight against that intolerance.”

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The menu has come a long way since then. Instead of featuring specific dishes from different cultures, Immigrant Food mapped out flavors and ingredients from many cultures and identified where they overlapped. These commonalities led to dishes celebrating spices and ingredients present in many cultures – a true celebration of immigrant influence and contribution.

When your mission permeates the product or service, customers notice. In Yelp user Jazzy L.'s review, she said every inch of the restaurant celebrated cultural diversity, especially the food. "The food was delicious. I cannot stress this enough. If you like ethnic food, this is definitely a place to check out. They have food from all around. The food came out fast, and it was hot and so flavorful. Definitely go visit this restaurant."

Immigrant Food is renowned for its authenticity because it makes immigrants the hero of every business decision. In fact, 99% of the staff are immigrants. As an entrepreneur, hiring employees who truly stand behind the mission – and even live it – are the ones that tend to stick around the longest.

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"People felt immediately that connection to the values of the brand," Ivanovic says. "In addition to providing paid sick leave, paid parental leave, paying people well, all those benefits, people want to work in a place where they feel like the brand represents who they are. A brand that's called Immigrant Food that advocates on behalf of immigrants is a direct connection to them, and I hope and believe that's why people end up staying, or turnover is very low."

Like most restaurateurs, Ivanovic has to ensure prices cover employee wages and benefits as well as the rising cost of ingredients. She explained that businesses considering a pricing change should justify it with sound financial

rationale. “The average EBITDA or profitability of a restaurant is 5%,” she says. We’re talking about margins that are so, so tiny. So the difference between a small price increase or not on your menu ends up being the viability of your business.”

Ensuring expenses are covered is one hurdle, but multiplying that by four different locations is another challenge altogether. With multiple locations, ensuring consistency across the board is a top priority, especially when it comes to building a loyal team.

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“When we knew that we were ready to start expanding, we wanted to make sure that we had the foundations in place, i.e., the culinary director, who is extremely talented and knowledgeable, and also an operations director to make sure that we have consistency and that it’s the same every day in terms of the quality we produce,” Ivanovic says. “It’s all about the people. The people that started with us from the very beginning are now the chefs of each restaurant.”

In addition to its dynamic kitchen, Immigrant Food’s business model includes an educational element. By providing an “engagement menu” with five ways customers can engage with the immigrant community, offering space for non-governmental organization (NGO) events and posting monthly “think tanks” on social media, Ivanovic is turning her mission into reality.

“People want to do something,” she says. “People care about these issues. They care about social justice. They want to do something, but they’re busy with their lives. They have kids. They have jobs. They’re not going to research all the NGOs they can volunteer with. So we wanted to make it very easy.”

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in Its Community By Following 5 Smart Strategies

One of the easiest ways of spreading your message is through social media. Ivanovic advises business owners not to dismiss this channel as being relevant only to younger generations. Instead, it's an opportunity to attract customers with your business personality.

"Honestly, be authentic. I think that's what's worked," she says. "When we do a letter from the founders, we personally write it and make it really heartfelt. Those are the newsletters that have the highest open rates. When we post something like a behind-the-scenes picture of some of our staff members, that gets the highest likes. When you try to make it too curated, people see right through that. Make it as authentically as you can."

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Immigrant Food has stayed true to its authentic brand by following these core principles:

- **Make a habit of reading and responding to reviews.** Assessing feedback is the only way you'll know how to improve your business and create a better customer experience. Make reading reviews a weekly item to motivate both you and your team.
- **Your mission is your center of gravity.** Every element of your business, from the decoration to the product, should clearly connect to your purpose.
- **Reward loyalty to reduce turnover.** As your business grows, rewarding loyalty and building a reliable team is paramount for maintaining consistent quality and service.
- **Embrace your authentic self on social media.** Curated content can feel more like an ad than a genuine experience or feeling, so post content that reflects

your brand personality.

Listen to the episode below to hear directly from Ivanovic and Jazzy, and subscribe to Behind the Review for more from new business owners and reviewers every Thursday. Available on Spotify, Apple Podcasts and Pandora.

Editorial contributions by Erin Palmero and Kristi Lindahl

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