

Francesco Marra

Heart of a Champion

Francesco Marra grew up in beautiful Naples, Italy, where the sun always shines and the kids spend as much time in the water as on the land. At the age of 21, he had already been a professional water polo player for more than five years, working his way through several of the major and national leagues and winning tournaments and championships along the way. In Italy, playing professional water polo wasn't necessarily a way to get rich, but it could certainly be a livelihood; several of Francesco's teammates recently retired in their early 40s.

Francesco credits his mother with teaching him the resiliency and tenacity needed to succeed. Her positive disposition, emotional support, and consistent encouragement were the exact type of emotional education that enabled the Marra brothers to realize their goals in life. Francesco's parents had divorced when he was only ten, and his mother and her new beau (an American citizen) chose to marry and move to the United States. Francesco's younger brother went along with her, and within a year, Francesco, ready for a big change, felt compelled to move, too.

The decision, like many others he has made throughout his life, was a bold one. He went from being a successful and prominent person in the community he loved to being a stranger in a strange land. He couldn't speak the language, didn't know the culture, and hadn't gone to any sort of business school. He had a few years of culinary education, but without English, he had to start from the very bottom as a prep cook in an Italian restaurant. But he did bring one important asset with him: the heart of a champion.

Demonstrating the same commitment and focus that had made him a star water polo player, Francesco set his mind to succeeding in his adopted country. For 12 months, he intensively studied English every morning until 1:30 and then

went to his job every afternoon at 3:00. He completed homework assignments on the metro and still found time to go out and have fun with his younger brother Emiliano in his new city.

As his English improved, he also learned Spanish since he was working in kitchens where most of his coworkers were from Latin America. "For a while my Spanish was better than my English," laughs Francesco. His aptitude for languages and for showing up worked in his favor. "I was the guy who would come in two hours early to see how a certain piece of meat was cut," remembers Francesco.



His dedication was noticed, and in a short span of time, he went from Kitchen Porter, to cooking on the line, to making pasta and entrees, to becoming sous-chef, to finally being promoted to Executive Chef within a mere three-year period. He was even featured in the *Washingtonian* as one of the best up-and-coming chefs in the DC area. It was a shockingly meteoric rise.

Despite the many challenges he faced, Francesco's boldness still wasn't exhausted. He finally found himself earning success and credibility in his community, and once again, he found himself thirsting for something more. He had been told he would be able to buy into the restaurant where he worked, but when that fell through, he knew he had to think about the future. He talked to Emiliano, and once again the pair decided to leave their relatively stable life behind for a new adventure.

The brothers founded a food import and delivery company, starting out with a single van and driving to New York City once a week to pick up the goods and deliver to DC restaurants. The decision was definitely a pay cut; Francesco had gone from a cushy \$80,000 a year gig as an executive chef, to, in his words "barely paying rent." However, he and his brother were thinking

long term. "I knew I had to take a step backward, to go forward," explains Francesco. "I knew it wouldn't be as much money right away, but I had to take the risk. I knew I had the commitment, the focus, and the work ethic. I knew long-term, this was going to pay off." Today, Francesco says his most prized possession is his old business card from that first business; it reminds him of how far he had to go, and how high he has climbed. Over time, they rented a 1,000 square foot warehouse, their first; by the time they sold the business in 2014, they had acquired a 24,000 square foot warehouse and ten trucks on the road. They also boasted about 40 employees and peaked at over \$7 million in annual revenue.

Through the 2007 economic recessions while running the food distribution business, the brothers decided they'd like to diversify into importing equipment and vertically integrate the opportunities with their existing food distribution clientele. Around this time, Francesco's older brother Vincenzo, came over from Italy with his family so he could reunite with his family and join the business. The brothers sensed a good business opportunity with brick ovens and began importing ovens from a certain manufacturer in Italy. Soon thereafter, however, they began receiving feedback from their American buyers. They were told the ovens were outdated and didn't have the technological innovation of some of the other modern options. So the brothers approached the Italian manufacturer with ideas for improvement. "We told them their product is antiquated and that it's not up to the standards of American manufacturers. They said 'no, we've been doing this for three generations and we're not going to make any changes'," recalls Francesco. "That's how our company, Marra Forni, was born." The brothers founded an oven company with Francesco as the President and CEO, Emiliano as VP of Sales, and Vincenzo, as the COO.

Today, Marra Forni handcrafts beautiful ovens with teams of masons and exquisite personalization. The ovens range in price anywhere from \$10,000 to \$60,000, because the final product is a one-of-a-kind artisanal piece of architecture and art. Everything on the oven is customizable, from the base to the tile. Marra Forni even offers on-site masons who can build the oven inside a restaurant or kitchen if moving the oven into the space would be impossible. "They are made to spec," affirms Francesco. "We only

have two machines in the masonry department. The rest are made by hand by our masons, and we only produce on demand. Today, we manufacture an average of 400 commercial ovens annually, have eight figures in revenue and are growing double digits every year. We are also planning to start our residential division by 2021."

The company was co-founded by the Marra brothers in 2011 as a builder of brick pizza ovens with some of the components being imported from manufacturers in Italy. Today, they import only the raw material from Italy; a proprietary refractory brick stamped with their last name and made with special materials to help retain heat. It is rated for over 2000 degrees Fahrenheit which allows it to cook very efficiently, consistently, and at a much higher speed.

The real turning point came in 2014, when the brothers chose to sell the food distribution business. It was then that Emiliano decided to depart the family business and go into business on his own. Francesco and Vincenzo decided to focus more fully on developing the oven business and expanding their capabilities. That year, they created the first rotating deck oven with a touchscreen controlled smart oven that allows users to customize the rotation of the oven anywhere from 15-280 seconds. "This is extremely important for a chef," explains Francesco. "If a chef wants to put processes in place to eliminate some of the errors in the kitchen, you can customize the rotation. If your perfect pizza heats in 95 seconds, you can set the rotation to 95 seconds and it's ready. The oven has the same footprint as a regular oven but can probably do double or triple the business. We have customers who have done as many as 250 pizzas in one hour, just with one oven." Marra Forni is the only company in the U.S. that offers the rotating deck oven.

Although they began making ovens for local mom and pop restaurants, today Marra Forni's clients include high ranking restaurant groups, boutique hotels, large chain hotels (Hyatt, Hilton, Marriot), stadiums, colleges, universities, hospitals (Johns Hopkins), retirement homes, and more. They have been the preferred oven provider for Whole Foods (almost 150 installations) and Wegmans for the last two years, and have also sold to Shop Rite, Balducci's, and other grocery stores. The list does not end there, they have also established good business relationships with large food service companies like the Compass Group,

Aramark, and Sodexo, as well as outfitting the VIP club in the Washington Redskins' stadium. "People think a brick oven is just for pizzerias," points out Francesco. "But it can be utilized for any style of cooking—braising, roasting, searing, or baking. You can use it to make bread in the morning or you can slow roast overnight. I always say, it's not just a pizza oven, it's a brick oven cooking solutions. I think we've done a phenomenal job being recognized as a pizza oven. However, there are 70,000 pizzerias in the U.S. and about 700,000 restaurants so we're going to start to change the focus and change the perception of what people have for our brick ovens."

Francesco's aspirations for Marra Forni are high. The company has expanded to a 27,000 square foot of space for manufacturing and storage, which brings their total square footage to about 51,000. They now have about 60 employees and have sold ovens on 5 continents and in 23 countries. Still, the bulk of their business is in the U.S., and Francesco plans to expand that. "We have four business developers in the U.S., two in Mexico for the Latin American market, and one that lives in Milan doing Europe and the Middle East," says Francesco. "We want to become a truly worldwide company whether that's by opening up manufacturing somewhere else or by acquiring companies strategically." Additionally, he wants to expand into residential ovens in 2021.

The brothers' goal in launching the business was simple: they just want to enable restaurants and chefs to meet their potential. "I'm in this for the best interests of the customer," affirms Francesco. "I want our customer to be very successful. We make a great product so they can be successful in their story, in their life, and in their careers. I've been there, I've suffered, and I've had my own restaurant that closed after seven years in business. I don't want anyone to go through what I have experienced. The restaurant business is probably the industry with the highest failure rate in the country. With our product, we hope we can help people with their operation, with their production, and with their cooking technology."

Amazingly, Marra Forni Ovens isn't the only venture Francesco is running. The brothers also have a catering business that contracts with the Italian embassy to provide food for the ministers and important personages passing through. As the only embassy with a full restaurant on Massachusetts Avenue (the triangle

of the world's most prominent embassies), it often attracts world leaders from nearby embassies, particularly the English, Brazilian, Japanese, and Swedish officials. Their contract with the embassy was just renewed for another six years, and they plan to expand their catering services further.

Additionally, they're running The Pizza University and Culinary Arts Center, a self-funded pizza school that they are in the process of turning into a non-profit business. "In Italy they have over 1,000 pizza schools, and Italy is the size of Florida!" exclaims Francesco. "In the U.S., they teach all kinds of culinary classes but nobody teaches pizza. So in 2018 we decided to open the school. All we want to do is give back to the community that made us successful. We want to help people get into the business and make sure they have the tools and information to do so successfully." The school offers courses three days a week, and students learn every step of the process of making fantastic pizza—from choosing the ingredients, to understanding the difference between types of flours, to learning to stretch the dough, and to learning how to properly use the oven. "We're hoping to have a Pizza University in every region," nods Francesco. "And we're getting some huge endorsements from industry leaders and food and beverage companies. I'm also working with Veteran's Affairs, to start doing pizza classes to help rehabilitate veterans. We want to give back and pay it forward."

The brothers have certainly come a long way since their childhood in Naples. Although their home was beautiful, their lives weren't always easy. Their father had some bad habits, and after Francesco's parents divorced, the boys spent little time with him. It was a defining moment for Francesco to experience the departure of his father and to watch the suffering his mother went through. "I decided at that moment I really wanted to be a better person," he remembers. "If I was ever a father, I knew I wanted to be a role model and to give my kids what I didn't receive from my father when I was young. I realized that family is everything and that you have to support each other. I promised myself that I would be a better human being and that I wouldn't make the same mistakes my dad made."

Francesco's mother and her three boys were taken in by family—Francesco's maternal grandfather and his beloved uncles. Without their care and support, the family would've been out on

the street. Francesco loved playing with his cousins, and came to think of his uncles, and especially his grandfather, like fathers to him. He remembers wonderful family trips to nearby Sorrento and remembers learning to cook from his grandmother. She taught him to make typical Neapolitan dishes, from fresh pasta, ragu, seafood dishes, and Italian desserts. “Nonna gave me inspiration to become a chef,” smiles Francesco.

Francesco’s sense of focus was always one of his greatest strengths. He is also admired by his colleagues for his innovative and unique approach to both business and design. He loved playing in the water and followed in his uncle’s footsteps to embrace water polo. By the time he was 15, he began playing with the First Division Team. In the meantime, he was also accepted to cooking school, where he began studying and planning for his career beyond water polo.

“I was playing water polo seven days a week on several different teams,” recalls Francesco. “I made a lot of sacrifices every day because I loved what I was doing. When everyone went on vacation, I was training with the Italian National team. I was really focused. When I do something, I really devote my time and commit to it. If I do it, I’ve got to do it really well.”

Francesco found mentors among the older players and coaches, and eventually, after joining the military for a year of compulsory service, he made the Italian National Military Team. With them, he travelled to St. Petersburg, Russia for the World Cup, where they won the Finals and became World Champions. He had held his own against the absolute best.

When his mother and brother made the big move to the U.S., Francesco knew it was time for him to try something new, too. He was already a champion, and he knew he could do it all over again and perform at a championship level. It was then that he picked up stakes, started over in the U.S., learned English and Spanish, and started washing dishes in restaurants.

Over the years, Francesco owned other businesses outside of the food distribution company. He co-founded with his brothers and a few other friends an Italian restaurant in 2007, the one he mentioned failed after the Great Recession. But he was fortunate and smart to have diversified his resources enough to be able to pull through that period of time.

In 2003, Francesco met Ana, the love of his

life, who had also immigrated to the U.S. at the age of 11. The two married in 2005, and since then have had three children—Sophia, Francesco Lorenzo, and Luca. Ana is a brilliant, professional woman who works as a CPA. “She’s an auditor and she audits me every day,” jokes Francesco. “She’s an amazing mother, a wonderful companion, and a great partner. Without her sacrifice, I couldn’t have done what I have done. I especially admire her integrity and feel blessed to have her by my side.” All three of his kids are active, with the boys choosing to play soccer, and Sophia practicing ballet three hours daily. Sophia hopes to go on to become a professional ballerina.

As a leader, Francesco reflects that he is equal parts democratic and autocratic. “It depends on the situation,” he elaborates. “I’m not the kind of person who decides that what I think is the only solution. I’m collaborative. I like people to share their thoughts and ideas. I listen and take into consideration their comments and suggestions. As far as vision goes, I have high aspirations. I want to be a worldwide company. We’re very committed to being a leader in our industry.”

To young people entering the working world today, Francesco advises having a strong work ethic. “There’s no secret to success, and success is not an accident,” he says. “You need to work extremely hard. You need to be focused and committed, consistent and persistent. You need to be willing to sacrifice. Without all of those things, success could be difficult to achieve. I came here without any detailed and specific training. Yes, I had some culinary training, but it was insufficient. I had to learn. I had to start from the bottom. I was an immigrant who didn’t know the culture. That is why my first business card is valuable to me. It represents my journey from 1,000 square feet to 51,000 square feet. You can achieve anything if you’re really committed.”

He also stresses that a little competition never hurt anyone. “I don’t see it as a threat,” he smiles. “It’s great for business because it drives you to do better every day. There’s space for everyone. At the end of the day, the best company will prevail.” To finish he evokes to the new generation, there is only one thing you cannot buy in life and it is time, so don’t waste any time!

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