

50 years of Pizza! Pizza! gave rise to new Detroit

A conversation with the Ilitches

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Amid this time of fear and troubles, let's ponder a few nice things about living and working in Detroit.

A concert or business meeting at the majestic Fox Theatre or a new casino-hotel.

The Tigers beating the Yankees at Comerica Park on a beautiful spring night. The Red Wings marching through another Stanley Cup campaign.

These things are all linked to a little food joint opened on May 8, 1959, in Garden City by a young couple in their 20s, Mike and Marian Ilitch. They called it Little Caesars Pizza Treat.

From that seed -- with Marian watching the cash as the ebullient Mike hatched promotional ideas -- grew the food and entertainment empire that came to include the Fox, the Tigers and Wings, the MotorCity casino-hotel and a global chain of carryout pizza franchises.

This week, Ilitch family members and their employees, franchisees and sports teams celebrate the 50th anniversary of Little Caesars.

Little Caesars grows from one pizza shop to big impact on Detroit

"We just keep plugging," Mike Ilitch mused last week on the cusp of the 50th anniversary of Little Caesars pizza, the engine of wealth that enabled Mike and his wife, Marian, to renovate and occupy the Fox Theatre, buy Detroit's baseball and hockey teams and one of its three casinos.

"You know, we didn't plan this," he added. "It just happened over the years, where there was an opportunity and we relied on our instincts and went ahead with it."

Marian, the practical partner to Mike's aw-shucks dreamer, quickly piped up with another perspective.

"Mike is very humble, and one of the things he did very early on, he would be out in the neighborhood. He spent a lot of time there, getting to know families in terms of what's affordable, what's not affordable. He never lost that touch."

So their success was not just dumb luck.

They didn't map out every move in advance. Who could have known, when the first Little Caesars Pizza Treat opened in 1959 in Garden City, that casino gaming would come to Detroit in a big way 40 years later?

But there has always been a philosophy underlying the Ilitch ventures: Create a product that people will want to eat, or experience, over and over again. Keep it affordable. And keep improving it.

In an interview last week, as they prepared for a week of 50th-anniversary festivities, Mike and Marian Ilitch talked with me about their businesses, their family of seven children and 21 grandchildren and Detroit, where they have had a major impact.

"It always hit me how much it cost to buy clothes for the kids. And how expensive it was to raise a family," said Mike, 79. "I had a passion to see if I could provide a quality product and buy the best ingredients available, at a price that would really fit in with people's budgets."

The first Little Caesars pizza in 1959 sold for \$2.39.

Dave Scrivano, Little Caesars' president, said that adjusted for inflation, that pizza should cost more than \$15 today. But by creating conveyor ovens and other innovations, the chain of more than 2,500 stores set the standard in affordability.

If the Ilitches were tight with a buck, they've also taken risks. In 1982, they took their passion for hockey and bought the Detroit Red Wings for \$8 million.

"The Red Wings were very affordable at that time," said Marian, 76. But the team was so bad, it was often called the Dead Wings. Under Ilitch ownership, the Wings became a perennial title contender and have won four Stanley Cups since 1997.

An even riskier move came in 1987, when the Ilitches bought and began to renovate the once-grand but decayed Fox Theatre downtown. Two years later, they reopened the theater and moved Little Caesars headquarters into the adjoining building -- at a time when downtown was at a low point following the closure of Hudson's department store and other businesses.

But the Ilitches, with support from then-Mayor Coleman Young, planted themselves downtown. In 1992, the Ilitches bought the Detroit Tigers, and five years later broke ground on Comerica Park.

Not all of the Ilitches' moves have won raves. Preservationists objected to their demolition of the long-vacant Madison-Lenox hotel structure in 2005, and other groups criticized the family for not doing more with other

land and buildings near the Fox. Speculation has been rife that they'll build a new hockey arena for the Wings near the Fox, but they haven't announced any plans yet.

Fifty years after the start, though, Little Caesars has outlets across the United States and abroad, from South Korea to Egypt and the Czech Republic.

So what's next?

"I don't know, maybe throw my feet up on the desk for once," cracked Mike.

"I don't believe him; he'll be thinking of something else," Marian replied.

And of course, he was. "Well, I am thinking about the next best things I could recommend to Chris for our company," Mike admitted, speaking of their son Chris Ilitch, CEO of Ilitch Holdings and the man leading the family businesses into the next half-century.

Contact TOM WALSH: 313-223-4430 or twalsh@freepress.com