

Elizabeth “Betty” Nunez is washing windows in the front of a building on Adams Street in St. Helena. In the back building his husband Aldo is rolling out dough for pizzas. It is almost lunchtime and they are getting ready for the crush of customers that will fill the booths at La Prima Pizza.

Nine years ago, Betty worked as a dishwasher at the pizza plate. Now, she and her husband own it. Many people wouldn’t have predicted that Betty, at 26 and Aldo at 30, would end up owning a Restaurant. Unless, of course they knew them.

“Betty is very ambitious, she wanted to succeed,” says former owner Warren “Nick” Nicholas. “But when she first came to work for me, she could barely speak English”

Just a Guess

One of eight children born and raised in Mexico, Betty moved here at 17 to learn English and go to the high school. Her older, whose husband worked in the vineyards, already lived in St. Helena.

On her third day in town, Betty and her sister went to La Prima Pizza for lunch, notice a help wanted sign, but couldn’t read English.

“I just guessed at what it said and asked for an application”. Betty says. “She was willing to do anything and willing to learn” Nicholas recalls.

The only problem was that she was told to wear a uniform of jeans, a t-shirt and sneakers.

“I couldn’t figure out what sneakers meant”, says Betty. “I thought they meant the candy bar snickers. I wondered why they wanted me to bring a candy bar to work” As the only Latina at the restaurant. Betty learned English quickly. She also learned the restaurant business. “I worked as a dishwasher and Busser the first year and a half, then as a pizza maker” she says. “Eventually, I spoke English well enough to take orders and work at the cash register”

After three years Nicholas had her ordering supplies, doing the inventory and making the schedules. Betty was finishing high school working at La Prima Pizzas well as at Meadowood Resorts, and she had a dream “My whole family is in the restaurant business. My father was a waiter, I wanted to go to college and learn hotel/restaurant management,” she says.

But in the meantime, Betty was fallen in love. Betty met Aldo when she came down to her town in Mexico to attend a locally famous fiesta. That was 10 years ago. Aldo an electrician originally from the Los Angeles area, says, “I just took one look to her green eyes” they kept the relationship going through visits and hefty long-distance phone bills.

A Life at home

In 1991 Betty, who used to study until 2 a.m. was awarded five scholarships. She attended Napa Valley College, for two years majoring in business management.

In 1993, she quit La Prima Pizza to get married to spend time as a housewife. “I was burned out”, she admits. Aldo, who’d moved to St. Helena, got a job working as an Electrician for Dan Williams. “I thought I knew what I was doing” Aldo recalls,” But Dan is such a perfectionist; He taught me everything I know. He’s a great person” Aldo continues, “The best Boss I ever had, the best Job I ever had”. Aldo worked for Williams for three years and was thinking of getting his license and continuing as an electrician. Betty was enjoying his life at home. But in 1994 The Nicholases decided to spend a

month's vacation in England. "They called me to come back and fill in for them," Betty says. She returned to work and stay, eventually managing La Prima Pizza restaurants owned by the Nicholases. And she made her mark. It had been almost 10 years in the restaurant, and people began saying to her "You are the Prima girl, right?" Others told her "You should own this place by now, You've been here forever".

An Opportunity

And, says Betty "I began thinking I would like to own the restaurant someday. It would be so great if I had the Opportunity to take it over". The she found out the Nicholases were trying to sell the business. At first I didn't seem possible. Aldo says, "I couldn't see buying it. We didn't have the money and I thought it was too big responsibility". But after a dinner with the Nicholases, who promises to finance the deal, and with the help from their family the Nunezes decided to go forward. "I thought it would be exciting to own something," Aldo says. "But we couldn't have done it without the help of the family". That was only six months ago.

Lots of lessons

Aldo says it has taken him about three months to learn how to make the dough and do all the prep work. Both Betty and Aldo work seven days a week. 10 to 12 hours a day –and the work is paying off. "It's packed in here for lunch and for dinner" says Aldo. Just last month, the couple paid their family back the money they had borrowed. Old customer have kept coming and some say they have noticed a change since the couple took charge. "I'm a pizza connoisseur", says Robert Vandeford who's been coming for the last six years. "The crust have gotten better" he says . "They are crispier". Mary Heath and George Ayala, who both work at Safeway, still come for work "I like the food" says Heath "And it's close". Another dream is simultaneously at work in the Nunez household –Betty is four months pregnant. "It's going to be boy" says Aldo adding that he won't be disappointed if it's a girl. "The big thing" he says, "Is that we want to raise our family now, maybe even buy own home" Betty's family now all live in St. Helena. Her two younger sister work at La Prima. Some day she'd like to open a second restaurant, but she'd also like to take time off and raise her own children.