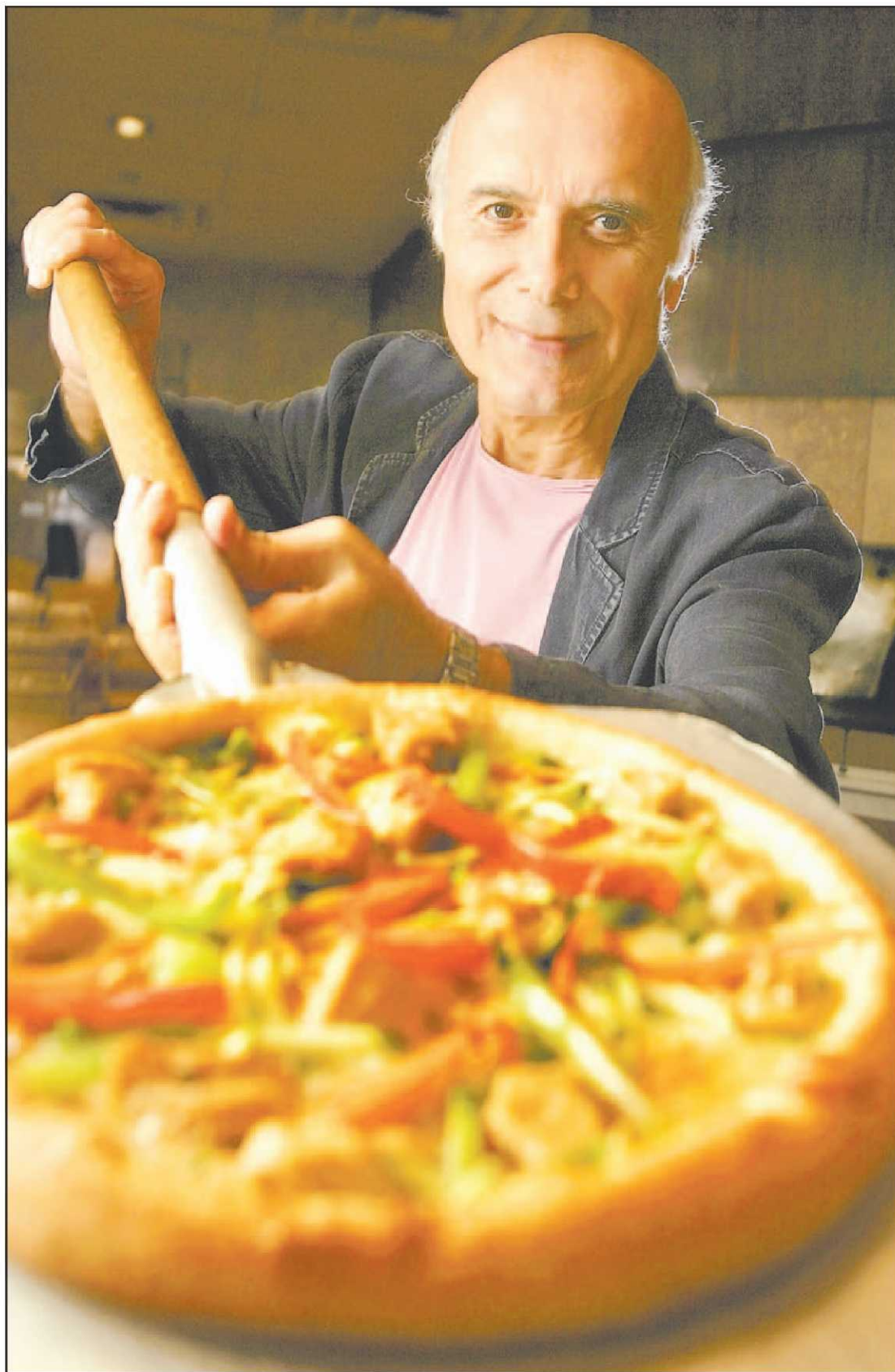


INSIDE BUSINESS | A WEEKLY CONVERSATION WITH SAN DIEGO NEWSMAKERS

# From politics to pizza



Sami Ladeki, founder of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza, with one of his signature pizzas at the La Jolla location of his restaurant chain. Ladeki, who also owns Roppongi Asian fusion restaurant in La Jolla, says he is bringing in about \$40 million a year in revenue. *Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune*

Change in career paths pays off for founder of Sammy's Woodfired

By **Lori Weisberg**  
STAFF WRITER

Wood-fired pizza would hardly seem the chosen path to success for a Lebanese-born young man convinced he was destined for a career in politics and diplomacy.

And even when Sami Ladeki switched career paths to hotel and restaurant management, he detoured into the rarefied world of luxury hotels and fine dining before landing on a more down-home concept that ultimately led to the lucrative Sammy's Woodfired Pizza chain.

Ladeki started his first pizzeria in 1989 in La Jolla with a Small Business Administration loan of \$300,000. Today, the chain has grown to 17 restaurants that Ladeki regularly reinvents with expanded, inventive offerings that defy the pizzeria moniker.

Over the years, Ladeki has dabbled in a hotel venture and more upscale restaurants in San Diego, including the former Fresh Seafood Restaurant in La Jolla and Blackhorse Grille in Del Mar.

But the restaurateur has recently decided to simplify his life and focus on his thriving pizza operation. Between the Sammy's chain, which has expanded to Nevada, Palm Desert and Los Angeles, and his slightly more upscale Roppongi Asian fusion restaurant in La Jolla, Ladeki says he is bringing in about \$40 million a year in revenue.

He spoke recently about his zeal for the restaurant business and what lies ahead.

**QUESTION:** What inspired you to get into the hospitality industry?

**ANSWER:** I left Lebanon when I was 20 and went to study political science, and when I got to Germany, it was too difficult to do, but I really had the passion for hotel and restaurant management. My dad had been in the tourism ministry in Lebanon, and I went around with him on the weekends to hotels, where the government assigned ratings to the hotels. It's become a lifestyle for me. I don't know when I'm working or not working. When I'm on vacation, I'm also checking out the best hotel or restaurant in town to learn from.

**QUESTION:** What attracted you to Southern California and San Diego in particular?

**ANSWER:** I used to live in San Francisco for two, three years and then went to Houston, but I always had the itch to come to San Diego for the weather, the people, the lifestyle. I think it's a privilege to live in San Diego, except for the taxation.

**QUESTION:** Although you have opened various types of restaurants, you're most closely identified with pizza. Why choose such a ubiquitous offering to make a name for yourself?

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## LADEKI

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## Hotel was 'too much work for too little money'

**ANSWER:** I was making good money at the time, but there came a point in my life when I was in hotels and working with people who didn't have any idea about food and beverage, so I decided, "I know what I'm doing, I should open my own business," but didn't have the capital for that.

I thought I could open a small place without having a chef I'd have to hire, so I chose pizza because it was when California-style pizza was (popularized) by Wolfgang Puck, and I thought it was a hell of a thing to do and cheaper to do. I was able to get a \$300,000 SBA loan and do it on my own without the expense of having to do a huge restaurant.

**QUESTION:** Your concept seemed similar to the already-established California Pizza Kitchen, so how did you distinguish your restaurants from their concept?

**ANSWER:** There's a guy named Ed Ladou, who had worked at Spago (with Wolfgang Puck), and I hired him to show me how to use the pizza oven. I took what he gave me and put my own soul in it. We have different salads (from California Pizza Kitchen). It wasn't stealing from each other. I have 20 different tapas that they don't have, six, seven salads they don't have. I only have four pastas.

**QUESTION:** Once you opened your first Sammy's, what prompted you to start expanding three years later?

**ANSWER:** It was so successful in the beginning, I was approached by the people who own the Del Mar Heights shopping center, so they built it for

me. When you have a successful restaurant, the mall people want you because it increases foot traffic. But I was so scared opening the first one. When you don't have any money, it's tough. Now we open restaurants left and right. My idea was to have a restaurant for all occasions. Originally, nothing on the menu should be over \$10. Now, everything is under \$15.

I own the company 100 percent. When you're doing well and the more you open, the less your corporate expenses are. If it works, why not?

**QUESTION:** You've made various attempts at fine dining but have closed or sold them: Tamarindo, a Nuevo Latino concept in La Jolla, and later Fresh. What lessons did you learn from those ventures?

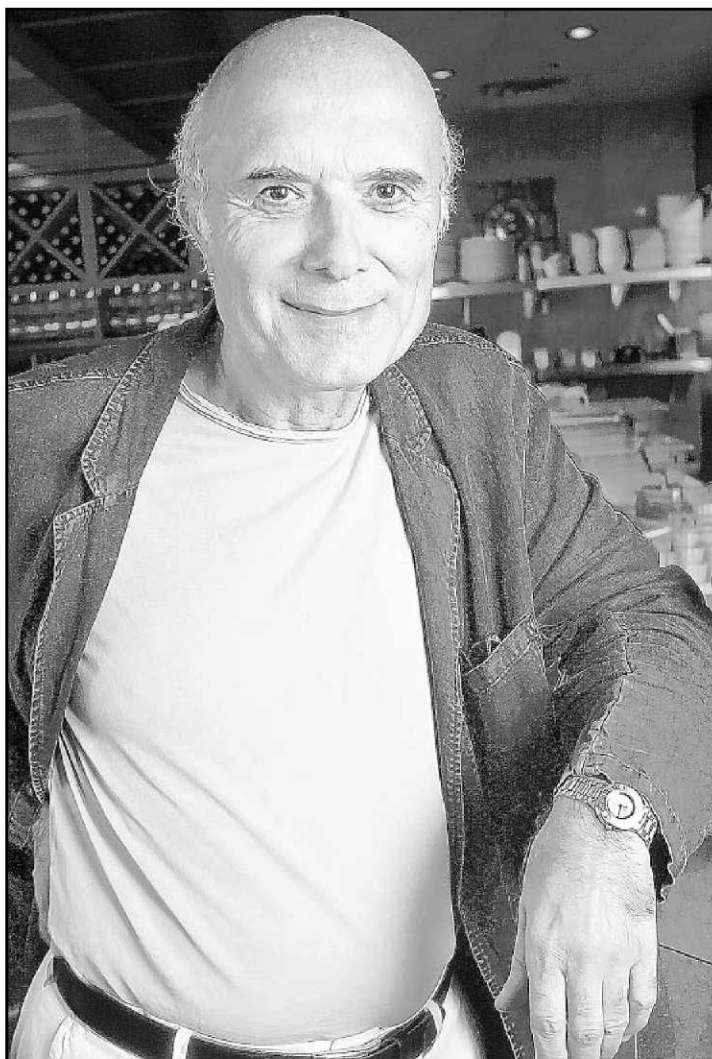
**ANSWER:** I had 10 or 15 Sammy's at the time, and I said to myself, this is what I did before, I want to do other stuff. These ideas come into your head and you have to get them out. At one point, I had eight different concepts.

Tamarindo was only making \$200,000 a year for me, so I decided to do seafood (with Fresh), but seafood didn't do much either, about \$300,000.

At one point I said to myself, "I don't know why I'm killing myself, driving up the highway, going to Palm Desert. I might as well get rid of these places and stick to Sammy's and Roppongi."

**QUESTION:** Many upscale restaurants have taken steps to redefine their image as more casual and affordable. What do you think is the future of fine dining, and are you interested in pursuing a more upscale project?

**ANSWER:** No, no, I give up on that. But I looked at Sammy's and thought, "Why should I confine myself to what Sammy's used to be?" So now I have hamburgers, tacos, 20 different appe-



**Sami Ladeki, founder of Sammy's Woodfired Pizza, opened his first restaurant in 1989 with a \$300,000 Small Business Administration loan. Howard Lipin / Union-Tribune**

tizers, from Thai food to Chinese food to hummus, and people like that stuff, and that's what I want to stay doing. I don't think fine dining is going to be around anymore. It's too expensive, too labor-intensive and it's difficult. You have to get more casual these days.

**QUESTION:** What changes, if any, have you made during the economic downturn as consumers cut back on dining out?

**ANSWER:** I looked at the high-food-cost items. You have to clean up your act when you have a recession. We used to have a 12-ounce steak, so we took that out and took the crab cake out. You go with the affordable comfort food. It's not really just a pizza place anymore, but the pizza makes you feel comfortable, and it's inexpensive and a family kind of restaurant.

**QUESTION:** What are your

## SAMI LADEKI

Owner of Ladeki Restaurant Group, which includes Sammy's Woodfired Pizza, Roppongi and Mosaic Catering

**Personal:** Age 67. Lives in La Jolla with his wife, Sharon.

**Education:** Attended the College of Hotel and Restaurant Management in Germany

**Career:** Before opening the first Sammy's in 1989, he worked at a number of resorts and hotels, including the Royal Sonesta Hotel in New Orleans, Caesars Palace in Las Vegas and the Princess Hotel in Bermuda. He previously owned and operated Tamarindo and Fresh Seafood Restaurant & Bar in La Jolla and Prime 10 Steakhouse and Blackhorse Grille in Del Mar.

**Hobbies:** Travel, dining out, working out at the gym.

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expansion plans, and which geographic areas do you feel are most suitable for your brand?

**ANSWER:** It's difficult to expand now in this economy, but I'm still looking for sites in Orange and Los Angeles counties. But it's expensive. I'm all by myself, with no investors.

**QUESTION:** You got into the hotel business in La Jolla with Hotel Parisi and then exited a couple of years later. Why was that, and do you plan any more hotel ventures?

**ANSWER:** It was very exciting, but too much work for too little money. I enjoy the design factor, putting menus together. I enjoy all that stuff, but I don't like operating the restaurants — but I do it. I still see the same people; I see three generations now. I never expected in my wildest dreams I'd be doing this 20 years later.

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