



# Ariel and Lyn Gonzalez

Miami, Florida



Karla Bakery

## *Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Ariel and Lyn Gonzalez:*

The origins of Karla Bakery date back to the 1960s when brothers Benny, Alfredo and Israel evolved the art of making pastries and confectioneries. When political turmoil caused the brothers to go their separate ways, each continued to perfect their tasty treats. Benny eventually made his way to the U.S. where he earned respect, national attention and awards for his creativity and exceptionally delicious products. He was even selected to make a cake for then U.S. President Ronald Reagan.

By 1989, Benny's son and daughter-in-law, Miguel and Karla Gonzalez, were ready to carry on the family tradition. Miguel's son, Ariel Gonzalez, and Ariel's wife, Lyn, who, together, oversee daily operations and strategic direction for the bakeries, shared the story behind the incredible journey and how Karla Bakery is poised to bring its savory

sandwiches and sweet pastries to foodies outside of South Florida and beyond.

“My family and I moved from Cuba to the U.S. in 1985 in search of new opportunities,” Ariel said. “Not long after we arrived, my father got a job as a baker for a well-known Cuban restaurant. He was and still is a very accomplished baker. He started baking in Cuba at the age of 12 for my grandparent’s bakery. Even though he took a job working for someone else when we first arrived, my father’s goal and dream was always to start his own business. He wasn’t sure how he was going to do it – he just knew it was going to happen.”

Ariel continued, “One day, he mentioned his dream to someone and one thing led to another and this person had a discussion with the owner of a shopping center. My father was the best baker in town and they were looking to add a bakery to this shopping center. The owner knew about my father’s reputation and was told by several people that he was the right guy. My father met with the owner and they worked out a deal that allowed him to move forward with his dream.”

The first Karla Bakery, named after Ariel’s mother, was officially opened in 1989 on Flagler Street. The whole family got involved and through the hard work of everyone, the dream was made possible. In fact, for the life of the business, family involvement has been one of the keys to its success.

Ariel, who was only 15 years old at the time, immediately started working for the family business. From learning to make pastries to eventually getting involved with production, product development, management, construction and expansion, Ariel has been there every

step of the way. He also perfected the pastry recipe. His parents taught him how to make pastries, but over the years, he focused on making them even better. According to Lyn, Ariel's wife, he was obsessed with making them better.

"He perfected the recipe and made them the best in Miami," Lyn said.

"He's a perfectionist, but that's what has led to his success. The devotion he has to his work is out of this world."

"I had to learn everything," Ariel said. "But more so than that, my father was adamant about continuing the family tradition. Even though I initially avoided some of the 'business areas' of the business, my father would continuously expose me to the non-kitchen side of the business. He would constantly stress the importance of family, tradition and the need to continue the business for future generations. He focused on taking pride in what you do and being the best at it. He instilled in me these principles and, despite thoughts of a career in firefighting and even engineering, I found my own passion and calling with the family business."

The original location did so well that the Gonzalez family decided to open a second location and then a third. At this point in the journey, space was becoming an issue. As Ariel explained, the decision was made to utilize a warehouse for storage.

"From this space, we supplied all of our stores with the products they needed," Ariel said. "This also helped our business when the economy crashed in 2008 and 2009. We had to become more resourceful. Having the warehouse space allowed us to better control the cost and supply of our commodity type products."

Aside from the family's love of baking and their focus on preserving their Cuban heritage through food, no part of this journey was straightforward. They faced challenges common to most startups, but also ones with the potential to derail most businesses. As Lyn shared, despite having to deal with two significant life events in the same year, Ariel managed to keep things from falling apart.

"Ariel's parents separated and his brother passed away around the same time," Lyn said. "Everyone went their own way. Even though Ariel was devastated, he wasn't going to let it stay like that. His main concern was keeping the family together and making things work. He just stuck with it and eventually, through his efforts, he kept the family tradition alive."

Ariel added, "I was scared, but I had to grow up real quick. We had four stores and, at the time, we were doing some wholesale work. Everything fell on me. It was an extremely emotional time, but I held onto the big picture. For me, letting go wasn't an option. I couldn't let everything we'd worked so hard to build get destroyed. I had to become stronger, but also required some outside assistance. In the absence of my mother and father, we brought in some other people to help run the business. Unfortunately they took advantage of the situation and ended up taking our recipes and concepts and starting their own businesses. In the end, however, I ended up convincing my parents to get back into the business. This was key for us to be able to continue the traditions they started over 30 years ago."

While not as challenging as the death of his brother and the divorce of

his parents, the attempt at wholesale was certainly a learning lesson and one that reassured Ariel that retail was the right path.

“We tried wholesale at one point,” Ariel said. “For me it was definitely an experience. We developed a line for the hospitals and did that for a few years. When 9/11 happened, the whole industry changed. Profit margins were squeezed. We had to readjust and reevaluate our wholesale business. In the end, we decided to let it go. It became a battle between local bakeries for a piece of the market. It wasn’t worth it. There was also the missing customer service component. We wanted to keep the quality consistent, to provide fresh products and to deliver the whole experience. This wasn’t possible with wholesale. Instead, we decided to concentrate all of our efforts on retail.”

Around 2012, when Ariel met and married his wife, Lyn, she joined the family business and together, along with Miguel and Karla, they made a strategic decision to expand the menu to include more savory items, but also to reinvent and streamline the concept.

“Before I started working with Ariel, I had a lot of experience in franchising and the corporate world,” Lyn said. “Working with Ariel, I helped Karla Bakery go from ‘mom and pop’ to making it more modern and streamlined. We made the bakeries more like a fast casual restaurant to attract different generations.”

For Ariel, the enjoyment of running day-to-day operations and strategic initiatives for Karla Bakery comes from his opportunity to be creative and connect with his team members. He enjoys developing new products and giving employees opportunities for advancement and growth.

“Our employees show so much gratitude when you make them part of our success,” Ariel said. “Helping them develop as employees and individuals is very gratifying. We give out awards – a Founders Award, for employees that demonstrate high standards and the Karla Award, for motivated and driven employees – as a way to show our appreciation and to continue to emphasize the principles on which the company was founded.”

According to Lyn, Ariel also enjoys the fact that the family is still working together, despite the divorce.

“Ariel was responsible for being able to put his family back together,” she said. “Karla and Miguel are back in the business because of him. The struggles were tremendous, but now the whole family is back and working together again. For Ariel, this is a tremendous achievement and something he’s extremely proud of.”

Lyn added, “Regarding our employees, everyone needs to be able to grow in all areas of their lives. We provide that for them. We teach them to be part of our family. We pass on the knowledge we were taught and we reward them for displaying the great qualities our founders possess.”

Looking ahead, Ariel and the rest of the team are focused on the next phase of their growth – expansion through franchising. For Ariel, who, along with Lyn, has spent a considerable amount of time and energy gearing the business more towards a newer generation, the opportunity to franchise is an exciting one.

“We’re currently finalizing contracts and manuals and expect to be ready to onboard our first franchisee within 4 months,” Ariel said. “There’s a big market out there for our products and services. People want to experience different cultures through food and drinks. Cuban culture is bright, colorful, full of life and struggle and we want to be able to translate that through our products. We want people to experience that in our pastries. Our ultimate goal is to expand throughout the United States and to continue sharing our family traditions for future generations to enjoy.”

What advice does Ariel have for aspiring entrepreneurs? “Be open to learning and don’t be afraid,” he said. “You will face many obstacles. What’s important is that you remain persistent. Despite failures, you continue to persist and continue to drive forward. When you have a vision and you remain committed to that vision, you will make it happen. You’ll do anything to make it happen. That’s been my key to success.”

Lyn added her own thoughts, “In every part of life, Ariel has taught me how to balance myself,” she said. “To be good at something, you have to find the right balance between your mental, spiritual, physical and emotional sides. Part of Ariel’s success has been his ability to properly balance these things. It requires a perfect symphony. It’s important to work hard, but don’t lose sight of everything else in the process. Find the right mix that works for you.”

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