

Michael O'Brien Sr.

Sanford, Florida



Michael's Gourmet To Go

Learn about Florida Entrepreneur Michael O'Brien Sr.:

Michael O'Brien Sr., owner of Michael's Gourmet To Go and The Corner Cafe, recently celebrated his 50th anniversary in the food and beverage business. From the time he was eight years old, he began to hone his skills and naturally developed a true love, passion and highly-regarded knack for cooking. As a 7th generation Floridian and a proud resident of West Volusia, O'Brien has an intimate relationship and a powerful connection with the community and those he's able to delight with his culinary creations.

"I was raised in West Volusia County by my mother and grandmother," O'Brien said. "I didn't have a father. When I was young, it was financially imperative that I got out there and did something to help my family. My first restaurant job was at Hunter's in downtown DeLand, which is actually still in business. Years later when I got married, I catered my

own wedding. The owners of the restaurant, where I was working at the time, were at the wedding. They were so impressed with my work that they referred to me a client of theirs who called and asked them about catering. That's pretty much how my catering career was launched."

As O'Brien grew Michael's Gourmet To Go, he owned and operated other restaurants, and even a gourmet wholesale pastry distribution company, before opening The Corner Cafe. As O'Brien shared, catering companies and restaurants go hand-in-hand. When the opportunity presented itself for the catering business to call Sanford home, he didn't hesitate to pull the trigger.

When Jody and I first came to Sanford ten and a half years ago, it certainly did not look the way it does today," he said. "However, between the history, architecture, location, easy access to an international airport, surrounding natural beauty, the waterways and I4, we knew the potential was there."

O'Brien continued, "A young lady that owned a juice shop in downtown Sanford, who we also had a mentor relationship with, called us while we were vacationing in North Carolina. She said she got a dream job offer and that she was going to close the restaurant. Seeing the opportunity and wanting to be one of the small business drivers to help the local economy recover, we took over the lease on Jan 5th, 2009."

Since opening The Corner Cafe on the corner of First Street and Park Avenue, O'Brien has delighted locals and tourists with homemade soups, including his signature French Onion Soup, Cuban sandwiches made with pulled pork and spiced & sliced dill pickles and a variety of salads with generous portions of your favorite toppings. Customers can

also mix and match their order to suit their taste of the day, and all for a very reasonable price. O'Brien shared his philosophy as it relates to price and value, "We're changing people's brain chemistry from how little can I spend to how much can I get? That makes all the differences in the experience for everyone."

Whether it's the catering business or the restaurant, O'Brien has faced his fair share of challenges over the years. Neither the restaurant business nor the catering business is for the faint of heart. It takes commitment, passion and an enduring love of food and its ability to bring people together.

"Catering runs hot and cold," O'Brien joked. "It's a funny play on words, but it's true. The catering business is a good bellwether for the economy as a whole. In regards to the restaurant, our challenges have more to do with the city and current and future development. Arteries, whether roads or walkways, are what feeds a business. It's taken a while to get some things done in Sanford, but it's happening on every level with great success! I recently had a meeting with various people that represent Sanford and, even though we had varying points of view, we were all speaking the same language. The sense of community is real. Coming from a kid who didn't have a father and who's mother had to move around for work, this is huge. I finally feel like I have found where I belong."

O'Brien shared that what he enjoys most about what he does is the ability to tinker and treat his love of cooking and food as a true art form. As an early riser, O'Brien is up before dawn and in his kitchen ready to roll before most people have their first cup of coffee. He's never afraid

to try new things and he's always looking for ways to improve his
marquee recipes.

"I make two four gallon batches of our French Onion Soup every single week," he said. "That's almost 5,000 gallons of soup since opening The Corner Cafe. For nine years, I cooked that soup the same way until I started noticing that the bottom of the pot would scorch up because of the sheer weight of the ingredients. To eliminate the scorching I simply split the massive pot in half and all of a sudden, the soup became even better. It was mellower and the onions were sweeter. That little tweak made a huge difference."

Looking ahead, O'Brien is focused on training a key employee to take over day-to-day operations. Over the next five years, he'll prepare this employee, along with his wife, to run The Corner Cafe and a new business, called the Emporium, set to open in August. The Emporium, located next to The Corner Cafe, will feature oils, vinegars, salt rubs and other curated "gadgets".

O'Brien offers some great advice for aspiring entrepreneurs looking at starting their own business. "Number one is to do something you can't imagine not doing," he said. "If you're going to run your own business, it will be all consuming or it won't work. For that reason, it's critical that you do something you love. It's also important to do your homework and make sure you're an expert at what you do. It helps to be the smartest at what you're doing. Lastly, always be learning. Always take the time to learn about what you do and how to do it better. Along the way, it's important to understand that it's not a race. Be patient and just put one foot in front of the other. It doesn't always come in the fairy tale order,

but if you're patient and you do the right thing, you'll get what you want."

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