

# woman

ATLANTA

BOLD. BALANCED. BUSINESS.

## Pasta-bilities

from CNN to pasta empire

### Entrepreneurs

How to succeed  
How to get money

Elisa Gambino  
Via Elisa

### Vikki Locke

Radio icon moves on

**Finding**  
The perfect tote

WOMEN<sup>2007</sup>  
OF *Excellence*

# Using her noodle

By Mary Welch

*Elisa Gambino makes the best pasta in town and, in the process, helped elevate Atlanta's culinary reputation.*



**T**iming is everything. Opening up a pasta business in the midst of the no-carbohydrate Atkins' diet craze, for instance, is not the best example of great timing. "It was tough," admits Elisa Gambino, who did just that, opening Via Elisa in July 2002. "But I had just done enough research to think that I could make a go of it. I didn't think that I would find a lot of people – a big group of people – who would want my kind of pasta. I just was hoping I could find enough."

Timing, by the way, is overrated. Gambino opened Via Elisa with the aim of making quality pasta and selling it to local restaurants. Today Gambino not only sells to restaurants, but she operates a retail store and supplies pasta to Atlanta area Whole Foods stores. She soon will be taking her pasta throughout the Southeast region of Whole Foods. And, she's just begun. Gambino's career as an entrepreneur is a convoluted one. She grew up in an Italian-American household in New Jersey. "It was typical for Jersey," she says. "My

grandparents lived around the block. I had 52 cousins. It was typical Italian-American – family and food." Gambino's father worked for the IRS, and eventually the family moved to northern Virginia and then later to Rome when she was in her teens. "That move was shocking. We were uprooted, and it was very difficult. I had been to a school with hundreds of kids, and now my school had a littler over 100 kids from 16 countries – and many of those countries I didn't even know existed. But I loved Italy."

**Covering the world with CNN**

Although she graduated from Virginia Tech, Gambino returned to Rome in 1985 because her family was there – as well as a young Italian man. She got a job in Rome as a translator for a start-up company called CNN. “CNN was new. They just needed bodies at that point. What they needed were bodies who knew what they were doing – and that wasn’t me. So it was a very sharp learning curve on both sides.”

But in this case, timing was everything. Things were happening in Europe. The Berlin Wall came down, and CNN needed someone there. Gambino got the assignment. The atrocities in Romania were exposed and Gambino was



**Elisa’s top lessons learned:**

- 1 Hire people who are smarter than you.
- 2 Knowing how to make pasta does not mean I know how to run a pasta business. Like making pasta, running a business is something I must learn to do.
- 3 Passion is important, but you also need a plan.

there. She was there when the Communist Party held its last meeting and when the Soviet Union disbanded. She quickly became a top news producer and was sent throughout the world, including Egypt, Syria, the first Iraq war and Somalia, where she stayed for six months. In 1996, in Somalia, she renewed a friendship with a London-based CNN photographer named Neal Broffman, and they started dating.

What happened to the handsome Italian? “Well, as my Italian got better, he became less interested in me. He thought I was cuter when I couldn’t talk back to him.”

Broffman and Gambino became a team and traveled the world on assignment for CNN. “I’m sure it wasn’t lost on CNN that they could save some money on hotel rooms,” she says dryly.

The two married, traveled the world and were assigned to Russia by CNN. They also had two daughters, Sofia

and Audrey. “In three years I had three jobs, lived in three countries, married and had two kids. But I was ambushed in Iraq and held for an hour with a group of other people. Suffice to say, that was it.”

So the Emmy-winning producer and family were reassigned to Atlanta in 1999 where she managed the national bureau. “I had two kids. I needed to be home and have a desk job. I was like the quartermaster sending people out.”

It was also around that time that Turner sold to AOL. “There was no longer any joy there,” she says. “I didn’t believe in the new corporate culture. It was shocking to anyone there this whole idea that CNN was part of this new corporation. It was time to go.”

**A budding entrepreneur**

Gambino wanted her own business. Her mother made her own pasta, and Gambino noted that she couldn’t buy pasta in Atlanta that reminded her of her mother’s. “I thought if I made something really local that chefs who cared about quality would buy my pasta,” she says.

She did some market research and discovered that there weren’t any gourmet-quality pasta shops in Atlanta. “Of course, the question became ‘Why?’ Then I changed the question to ‘How can I make the highest quality pasta?’”

The answer wasn’t easy. She went back to Italy to research pasta with the Gamberoni family, one of the leading pasta-makers, and learned the trade. She found eggs from free-range hens, organic semolina and organic flour in North Carolina. The cheese was authentic and imported from Italy. “No gimmicks,” she says.

“I thought, ‘What’s the worst that can happen? It’s easy to take risks if you have nothing to lose. So my kids won’t have financial security. I worked my way through college and they could do that, too,’” she says. “And, if it works out, then they may not have to wash dishes to get through school like I did. Sometimes I think we do a disservice to kids by handing everything to them anyway.”

Confident in her product, Gambino also addressed the business side. She took classes at Georgia State University and participated in the state’s FastTrac entrepreneurship-educational program that helps entrepreneurs develop the skills to create, manage and grow a business. With a home equity

**Reality Check**

Gambino went to her bank and asked for \$1,000 overdraft protection on her business’ checking account. The bank told her that her husband would have to co-sign.



**Inside her pantry every week**

- 7,000 ravioli
- 3,000 eggs
- 60 pounds of cooked spinach
- 1,000 pounds of flour

loan, she bought the best Italian equipment and opened her doors in 2002, hoping to sell pasta to a couple of restaurants.

“I had my ducks in a row. I had a business plan, financial understanding of what was going on. That’s something the classes gave me – confidence. Let’s do it!”

Not so fast. She went over the figures with her accountant. “The entire time I can tell she’s looking at her watch. She didn’t take me seriously. I was devastated.”

She went home to her husband (who by this time had left CNN and started his own video production business, One Production Place). She asked him if she were doing the right thing. He said to go for it. They found another accountant.

**The learning curve**

“Starting a business is a huge learning curve,” she says. “In fact, one whole learning curve

is just learning to ask the right questions. I found that people didn’t offer a lot of advice and information unless I specifically asked. It wasn’t obvious to me at the time; it is looking back.”

She knocked on restaurants doors, and a few invited her in. She achieved her goal – to make quality pasta, sell it wholesale to restaurants, and to be home for her kids.

Chef Gerry Klaskala of the Buckhead restaurant Aria was one of Gambino’s first customers. “It was the quality,” he says. “She was all about quality. There were plenty of people making pasta, but not at her level.”

In fact, the restaurant rarely served pasta because Klaskala couldn’t find quality pasta. “It wasn’t our focus, but with Elisa we were able to serve more pasta dishes. If it’s not up to Elisa’s standards, she doesn’t make it or sell it.”

But you can’t keep outstanding pasta a secret. One day a woman knocked at the door of her Howell Mill Road kitchen and asked to buy some pasta. She had eaten Gambino’s pasta at a restaurant and loved it.

“She wanted to buy some, and I didn’t even have a cash register,” Gambino says. “I said, ‘I’m not selling retail.’

I didn’t want the hours. I wanted to be home with my husband and kids. They would come, eat some pasta, help me clean up and we’d go home. My daughter, Sofia, could crack 168 eggs without a single shell going in the bucket when she was 6. I wanted a lifestyle business. I wanted a life. I wanted to be home in the afternoon. I didn’t want to do retail. Right!”

Needless to say, Gambino saw an opportunity and decided to try her hand at the retail side. But the new venture meant expanding the business in ways she hadn’t anticipated. She asked her friend Bess Boeri to share the retail space. Boeri had owned an Italian store Salameria Tagglasea at the Sweet Auburn Curb Market.

“It was crazy,” she says. “I now had to hire help, and I had no money to hire. That’s why a lot of businesses fail – they have no money to sustain growth, and the owners get burned out. They’re doing all the work instead of building a business.”

Her mother, sister and a friend pitched in and lent her money to buy a truck and pay the driver because she could no longer deliver to restaurants by herself. “It was a huge \$30,000 truck with my name all over it. It was a huge milestone. It said ‘Here I am!’ I’m putting money on the line.”

Every entrepreneur has a secret line, she says. It’s the line where you say that you can still afford to lose the money if the business fails. “Then you turn the corner, and it’s not OK. You grow it and you start thinking about assets, and it’s something important in your life and it’s part of your future. In my first two years, I never called it a business. I didn’t know what it was. I just made pasta.”

**With success comes ... more success**

The store took off. Via Elisa sells pasta, sauces and imported cheese and meats. Gambino’s reputation as a local, quality food supplier grew as well. “We kept hearing wonderful things about her. She was dedicated to fabulous taste and fresh ingredients – the best ingredients,” says Cheryl Galway, regional marketing coordinator for the South Region of Whole Foods.

Whole Foods told Gambino they supported local businesses and wanted her to provide it with pasta. “It was like nirvana – the holy grail when Whole Foods came in,” she says. “I’ve got to tell you, Whole Foods walks the walk. They not only bought my product but they promoted it and they paid every 15 days. They gave me my cash flow. You don’t know how important that is to a small business. They paid on time.”

Of course, making pasta at that level – and maintaining its quality was not easy – for either side. In 2004 both

sides agreed to give it a year and see what happens.

“We had to ramp up production, get bigger machines, deal with different packaging, labels. I had to make sure I could do it and not have it be at the expense of the retail and wholesale business,” Gambino says. “It made me really think if it made sense to do all that for something that might not be successful, but it did make sense.”

Galway agrees.

“We worked a long time for us to develop the processes so that we could deliver the quality product that Elisa made,” Galway says. “We had to develop packaging in order to keep it fresh. We put it in our specialty department and introduced our customers to it. Both ends gave it a lot of support. We wanted it to succeed, but we weren’t sure we could pull it off. But now it’s very successful.”

The ramped-up production brought an unexpected bonus. Because she was ordering in more volume, suppliers were now willing to deliver. “It was like the lap of luxury. Instead of going and buying the 50-pound bags of flour and carrying them into my truck, I got them delivered. But, of course, the trucks wanted to deliver to the loading dock, and I didn’t have a loading dock!”

Gambino now has six employees and will shortly sell her product to Whole Foods stores throughout the Southeast. Again, she is worried that the packaging may not maintain the freshness and is working on ways to preserve the “just-made flavor.” She is also exploring ways to take the product nationally, including possibly opening satellite offices so that the freshness would be better maintained.

“This is beyond what I initially envisioned, but it’s exactly how I wanted it to be. It’s hard for me to wrap myself around it. It’s a little business that is part of a community, and it is well received in that community. There is a sudden pressure to do more, and you have to think if that really fits into your life and what you want. How much bigger can you get without changing?”

Gambino takes such questions seriously. She worries that any expansion will come at the expense of service given her customers and that it will “chip away” at her humanity. “You can build a company that is small and solid and built on principles that you can live with,” she says. “It’s like raising a family. You want to raise it in a way that you can be proud of. You know, have the kind of kid who has the right values. The kind of kid that you want to meet and know and mean it. Every day I wonder if I can still keep doing that with this business and grow it.”

### Words of Advice

Now five years into the business and contemplating national expansion, Gambino’s business is certifiably

successful. She feels confident enough to offer – if not advice – some perspective from her success. For instance, she says one of her first mistakes – adding that other entrepreneurs suffer from it as well – is not to recognize the possibilities. “You have to plan for the success, even if it doesn’t happen. You have to keep the momentum going.”

Another is to ask how the business will fit into your life. “Does it make sense for my life and family? Because if it doesn’t make sense, you’re better off working for someone else,” she advises.

She also believes that if you are going to start a business, everyone around you has to be 100-percent supportive and on board. “It’s hard on a marriage if your partner doesn’t have the same desire to grow the business that you have. I hear that a lot of times that the husband is home with the kids and he’s picking up the slack and it’s not a happy home. My kids are so proud of this place.”

Finally, she says, “You’ve got to be having fun. It’s not about the end. It can’t be because the end – the big pay-off – may never come. And you’ve missed out. So you have to have fun while it’s happening.”

You know, she says, “I never used to say I had a business. But now I am very proud to say that I have a business that makes pasta.”

So is Aria’s Klaskala.

“Elisa is passionate about her product, and because of that she has helped change Atlanta,” he says. “She raised the bar so that everyone had to become better. She is very important to the restaurant and culinary scene here. The city was ready for food and restaurants that were world class, and her presence and her commitment to quality came right at that time and Atlanta’s the better for her.”

Maybe timing is everything. ♀

### Elisa’s advice

- 1 Read, study and learn and reach out to those who can teach you something and don’t be afraid to ask for advice.
- 2 Have a business plan that makes sense for the kind of life you want to have. The business should be part of a bigger plan for your life.
- 3 Always, above all else, keep a sense of humor because if you don’t sell your business for millions one day, at least you had a great time each and every day, no regrets!