

40 Under 40 Business Star Joe Manzella

By Lynn Armitage

Title: Proprietor/Founder of TAPS Fish House & Brewery in Brea, and proprietor of The Catch in Anaheim

Family: Single, with three cats, Franklin, Sammy and Molly Cat; youngest of five children

Residence: Yorba Linda

Best business decision: “Promoting Chris Snyder to General Manager. TAPS would never be where it is today without his unrelenting passion and leadership.”

Worst business decision: “Not building a large room at TAPS that could hold 200+ guests for private events. Saying, ‘No, I can’t take your reservation of 200 for \$50,000’ burns me.”



Joe Manzella loves cats, double-cut pork chops, great quotes and college football. “It’s *Arizona State!* Don’t say ‘Arizona,’ I’ll have a heart attack.” (One guess where he went to college.) But Manzella’s real passion is running restaurants. “I love the buzz of this business,” says the 37-year-old, somewhat-feisty proprietor of two thriving, award-winning Orange County restaurants: TAPS Fish House & Brewery in Brea and The Catch in Anaheim, an apropos name for an eatery whose owner is just that.

TAPS is Manzella’s baby, and a big one at that – a 14,000-square-foot vision he brought to life six years ago. “It was always going to be, from conceptualization, the most comprehensive brewery in the country, leading with fresh fish and prime beef.” With a \$5.2 million stake from his father, the former major accounts rep for Xerox followed his hunch. After three years of planning and extensive research (Manzella even worked as a waiter to “learn the mini culture.”), and 85,000 distressed bricks later, TAPS opened in September 1999 on the Birch Street Promenade in Brea to a packed house (500 seats) that was starved, according to the very quotable restaurateur, for a great dining and beer-slugging experience.

“There’s an extreme shortage of quality dining in Brea,” the Yorba Linda resident explains his location choice. “You go out and see throngs of people waiting for Claim Jumper for three hours.”

Manzella says there’s something for everyone at TAPS: a 21-seat oyster bar, four fireplaces, a spacious lounge lorded over by an 80-square-foot TV screen, surf-n-turf dining, live entertainment and a \$500,000 brewery run by Victor Novak, an award-winning brewmaster who crafts about 35 different European ales and lagers a year.

“Customers wear shorts and flip-flops, all the way to \$1,000 Donna Karan suits. One guy’s eating a \$70 entrée and two tables down, someone’s just hanging out having a few beers.” His philosophy is simple: “Stop ramming down people’s throats stuff they don’t want and just let them come in and be happy.” It’s a formula that cooks. Among its many awards, TAPS has received an “excellent” rating by the prestigious Wine Spectator and Zagat Survey; and last year, it exceeded \$8 million in sales.

Amazingly, the enterprising Manzella had no previous experience in restaurants. “I’m just incredibly instinctual. I knew in my heart what I had in my head.” What he does know about is great food (although he eats boxed macaroni and cheese on occasion). “I grew up in a large, loving Italian household with a mother who was a tremendous cook.” But

mostly, the Palos Verdes native was inspired by his late father. “My father was extremely successful . . . the #2 man at Northrop Grumman for 26 years,” recalls this proud son. “He passed away two weeks after September 11. But he left me so equipped to succeed.”

Now Manzella inspires his 160 TAPS employees to “make every day here a special day.” In the kitchen hangs a large sign strategically placed above the entry to the dining room that reads, “Serve With Pride.” He borrowed this idea from the fighting Irish of Notre Dame. “When players come out of the locker-room tunnel, they reach up and touch a sign that says, ‘Play like a champion today.’”

With TAPS running “like a well-oiled machine,” Manzella took on another challenge with siblings Peter and Michele, and revived The Catch in Anaheim, a stone’s throw from Angel Stadium. The Manzellas invested \$3 million in a complete overhaul of this local mainstay previously owned by the McDonald family of Newport Beach for 20 years. “It came at the perfect time. We opened August 16, 2002, and two months later, we’re celebrating the Angels’ World Series.”

The 350-seat Catch has hit a grand slam with Angels fans, power-lunchers and food critics ever since, ringing up almost \$4 million in sales in 2004 and winning the Award of Excellence from the Wine Spectator the last two years. “It’s become the darling of Anaheim again.”

Manzella’s favorite quote is, “Life is not a dress rehearsal,” and so he continues to dream big. Within the next 10 years, he envisions owning about eight restaurants across the country. He’s already taken TAPS on the road. In mid-2006, the second TAPS Fish House and Brewery will open in The Shops at Dos Lagos in Corona, an upscale project currently under development by Poag-McEwen. Why Corona?

“Corona is literally blooming right before our very eyes and is becoming more like ‘East Orange County’ every day,” explains Manzella. This new location will be even bigger than the Brea hot spot at 19,600 square feet and will have that 200-person special-event room he regrets not building in the first place.

His advice to other rising stars? “Turn your back when people say, ‘No.’ I was told ‘No’ probably 500 times. Those same people now are the ones patting me on the back saying, ‘Great job! We knew you could do it,’” Manzella laughs. “Just plow through the negativity and doubters and believe in it. Be absolutely relentless.”