

He's a giant with kindly eyes, who you immediately feel on familiar terms with. It's pretty much like what happens in his TV ads, when he arrives with a big smile to offer his fresh pasta to a classic family. Born

Lunch with Giovanni Rana

GLOCALIST LEADER 1

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into a poverty, Rana is yet another example of a creative Italian businessman. His group has an annual turnover of over 300 million euros, and his son Luca, who will succeed him...

Today, Giovanni Rana is not just the largest producer of fresh pasta in Europe, with his incredible series of specialties. His name also stands for quality cuisine in Italy and France, thanks to the seven Giovanni Rana inns in Italy. The signature locale is located in Verona, where the Giovanni Rana-Tre Corone inn looks out over the marvelous Piazza Bra. The latter name of Tre Corone was the appellation of the past incarnation of this restaurant, which is part of Veronese history, so its new owners didn't want to change it. In France, Giovanni has opened seventy inns in the Casino cafe chain and aims to reach the magic 100. There's a signature restaurant in France, too. It's located in another splendid setting; namely, the Rue Rivoli in Paris. In all these inns, in Italy and in France, the accent is on tradition and on offering typical Italian cuisine. With Rana fresh pasta playing the leading role, of course. Giovanni Rana a giant with kindly eyes, who you immediately feel on familiar terms with. It's pretty much like what happens in his TV ads, when he arrives with a big smile to offer his fresh pasta to a classic family. Born into poverty, he's made a huge fortune and has even earned an honorary degree. As

a member of the *nouveau riche*, he inevitably has a few faults, but still has a genuine way of behaving and speaking which he says (if he mentions it) is a reflection of the genuine quality of his creations. And let's not call them "products"; after all, they're not screws or bolts, but his playful pastimes in pasta, and he rightly feels unbeatable with its mixtures and fillings. We say "rightly" because this giant, who has traveled from one family to another on TV for years now and has endeared himself for his tasty specialties, is number one in fresh pasta in Europe. And since the more you eat, the more you want, and our clever Mr. Rana is capable of anything, you might think his goal in the great stew of global markets is to become number one in the world. It's a legitimate theory, seeing as this giant who is known everywhere in Italy as Giovanni, but to his family and friends as "Gianni", set up shop in America a year ago. His initial results lead us to believe that his magical creations in pasta – a glorification of Made in Italy craftsmanship – are getting popular among housewives in the States.

And everyone said he was crazy when he started! Even his family. "There goes that

nut again!" his Mom is said to have cried out when her Gianni, the youngest of her six kids, said he was leaving his bakery and his partner (his brother) to go into business for himself, which had been his dream ever since he began working. "I'm going to sell fresh pasta", he announced, and his mother thought that besides having little interest in school, he was also off his rocker. After all, destiny had never given her enough time to dream. She had become a widow with six kids when she was still young.

Crazy Gianni started in the spring of 1959, so now we're only a couple years from the 50th anniversary of his business adventure. Consummate show-off that he is, he retraced his personal story for east.

How old were you when you went into business for yourself?

I was born in 1937, so I was around twenty-two. I'd been working since I was thirteen.

Schooling...

Elementary school, then professional school – the institute of the poor – and then off to work.

Would you have liked to continue school?

Not in the least. Let's say I was somewhat vivacious. And also, we were poor. There were six of us kids. My father had been a cereal dealer, and then sold tobacco products. We were fairly well-off, but had a stroke that confined him to an armchair and a bed. It went on like that for six years, and then he died. So I quit school, I wasn't accomplishing much anyway. And I went to work. I was so young I was still in shorts.

Where?

At a bakery in San Giovanni Lupatoto that belonged to two of my brothers. I was the youngest, and there was fourteen years' difference between me and the oldest. That's a lot. So my brothers made things really



hard for me. They did it with the best of intentions, but after a month, I thought maybe it would be better to go back to school. Because it was hard. Really hard.

What did they have you do?

Everything. I'd help them make the bread and then deliver it house to house. That's the way it went in those days. A small bakery delivered. So I'd get up at one a.m. I finally got used to it, like a convict in prison. But in the meantime, I fell in love with what I was doing. Baking bread is an art. Why don't they call it "white art"?

Yet, I was chafing at the bit. I wanted to go into business for myself, I was just waiting for the chance. Meanwhile, one of my brothers left the bakery to become a confectioner. After all, three in a bakery are too many. After a while, I left, too. It was 1959. I wanted to have a bakery all my own, and my girl friend agreed. I'd been looking at a place in Cadidavid.

So you were engaged...

Yessir. I was 22, and handsome. I looked like Maurizio Arena, who all the girls liked. Boy did they!

Let's go back to the bakery in Cadidavid.

I changed my mind along the way. I fell in love with fresh pasta. In our area, I mean in the country, pasta was homemade. Regular dry pasta was sold loose and by measure, and was the exception. But things were changing in our area. Women were beginning to work outside the home, and they had no time for making pasta. Even tagliatelle, which was an everyday staple, and tortellini, which was a holiday dish. So I got it into my head that I'd do it for them...

Everyone was skeptical, weren't they?

That's right. But I pressed on. I wasn't the first one to delve into fresh pasta. In Bovolone, a town near here, there was already a shop making fresh pasta. They said it was going bankrupt, so I paid it a visit. I remember it like it was yesterday. It was a Sunday afternoon. I was willing to buy the place, but the owner, who was sixty-two and an old man in my twenty two year-old eyes, hadn't the slightest intention of selling. But he liked me, so I began working for him.

Doing what?

Learning. Learning how to make meat tortellini, his specialty. He had a thing about them. If you want to make fresh pasta, tortellini with meat filling is the-be-all-and-the-end-all. I listened and I learned. I worked with him about a year. I left when I felt I was ready. The first thing was to find the right place.

In Bovolone?

No, in San Giovanni Lupatoto. I was born in Cologna Veneta, but my home town is San Giovanni Lupatoto. I grew up there, my world was there, and it was where my family and my friends were. So, I wanted to set up shop there. However...

However?

It wasn't that I had a lot of money. Luckily, I got help from my girlfriend's father, who became my father-in-law. He had a gift shop. I asked him if he knew anyone who'd be willing to rent me a place cheap, and he said he had a small shed he didn't need. If I fixed it up, he wouldn't ask for a lira in rent. So I took him up on it. I had a friend who was a mason, and he and I turned the shed into a workshop.

With an area of...

Seventy square meters, six by ten, which was more than enough. So we opened.

You and who else?

Me and my girlfriend. I made the pasta and she did the filling. Then I sold it. I'd already spread the word.

Who did you sell it to?

To stores. And to bakeries and grocery shops.

I understand business was good right off the bat.

Yup, right from the start. It was so good that me and Laura, my fiancée', couldn't keep up. I began selling directly to customers. And I started hiring. I hired women. Only women. I paid them partly in cash and partly in kind.

In kind?

In kind; that is, with my tortellini. Some of which they may have resold. The pasta of

Giovanni Rana, rather of Gianni, was immediately... how do they say it these days?... trendy. It was much better than what was being made at home. So much better that at a certain point, even the ten or so women I'd hired weren't enough. And I had to start thinking of a minimum amount of automation. That was a problem...

Why?

Because the machines that could give us a hand didn't exist. And they didn't exist because nobody had ever heard of fresh pasta which was better than homemade. But I didn't lose heart and designed a little line...



_Giovanni Rana at the ceremony during which he was awarded an honorary degree

A little production line?

Yes, a little automatic line for tortellini. I still made only those. Production kept on increasing. And so did sales and profits, because by that time I was selling outside the province. And my factory became too small. So, I had to get bigger to meet demand, and in 1970, I moved to via Pacinotti, here in San Giovanni Lupatoto, and I transferred everything – counters and work benches alike – into a brand-new building.

With an area of...

Two thousand square meters. Today, it sounds like nothing, but at the time it seemed as big as Fiat. I felt so great, I could touch the sky. And yet, I was up to my ears

in debt. The banks had given me 70 million lire. Do you know how much 70 million lire was back then? I was living on nervous energy and sleeping two hours a night, with a note pad on the night table so I could jot down ideas when they came to me.

What kind of ideas?

For new products. For new product lines.

Did you continue designing the machines?

Yessir. There was nothing on the market. I came up with a very efficient line. I wrote the book on it. And sales shot up and up.

Where?

Throughout Italy. First, only in Veneto, because that was our home turf. And then in Lombardy.

And where do you sell your fresh pasta now?

Almost everywhere in Europe. For example, we're first in fresh pasta in Spain, Sweden and Luxembourg, and second in France. We're so successful abroad that exports (of fresh pasta, you understand) account for 40% of turnover.

Which is?

As a ballpark figure, I think we reached 300 million in 2007. Since the time I left the bakery, I've always grown. There's never been a slowdown, never an interruption, and I've always been in perfect harmony with my employees.

What do you mean?

That at Giovanni Rana, there's never been one hour, a single hour, of temporary layoffs. There's been only one strike, due to a misunderstanding. And I've never operated in the red.

Is it correct to say that you've become famous because of advertising?

That depends. If you're referring to my products, I'd say no, because I'd want to advertise if people didn't like my pasta. But if you're implying me personally, my face, the answer is yes. Advertising has made me recognizable everywhere, in Italy and abroad. In fact, they tell me I'm the best known Italian in Europe. Women especially like me. And children do, too, they see me as a grandfather.

Who came up with the idea of making you the star in the spots that advertise your products?

I did. A businessman is somewhat vain. And also, he's a fun guy. Just think, after the first ads, people thought I was an actor.

You must have been flattered.

Quite the opposite. I even changed ad agencies. And that was a good move, because people finally understood that the actor was Giovanni Rana, the producer himself, and that's what made me and my fresh pasta popular.

How much do you spend on advertising?

10% of turnover. And not just in Italy, mind you. Everywhere in Europe.

Have you thought of who will take your place in the company?

Already done that. I have one son, Gian Luca (editor's note: currently the president of the Verona Industrialists' Association). He's in charge now.

Did he pay his dues?

Naturally. He began in purchasing.

Do you get along?

Of course. When I remember that you have to be a great philosopher to get along with a son.

If he's already taken your place, what else are you doing besides starring in your spots?

I'm the president.

OK. But what exactly do you do?

Everything and nothing. All kidding aside, my primary activity, besides being the star of the spots, is research and development, and plant engineering.

How much do you spend on research and development?

Throw in quality control and you reach the nice round figure of two million euros a year. That's not peanuts, is it?

No, it's not. But in a fresh pasta company, what does research and development involve?

Creating and trying out, trying out and creating. You think I'm kidding? The only

thing I do is taste things and say they're no good. If I don't like something, it won't get marketed. You see, with my fresh pasta and my fillings, I'm a bit like a painter who combines colors. But I combine tastes, and that's harder. And given my success, it's clear I know what I'm doing with flavors and their combinations. In short, people like Giovanni Rana and will continue to do so. And you know what my dream is?

No. What is it?

To be liked more and more.

Would you also like to be liked on the stock market?

No. Never. Not as long as I'm still around. █

GIOVANNI RANA IN FIGURES

Founded in:	1959
2006 turnover:	236.8 million euros (2007 prediction: over 300 million euros)
2006 net profit:	2.7 million euros
Employees:	700 (2,000 including associated business)
Foreign plants:	Belgium and France