

# All in the Family

CONTINUING A 72-YEAR HISTORY WITH THREE GENERATIONS OF DEDICATED SERVICE, PAUL MANCE, MICKEY MANCE AND JUSTIN ESSMAN KNOW THEIR VENUES ARE MORE THAN JUST ABOUT FOOD. THEY'RE CREATING MEMORIES AND SPACES WHERE PEOPLE FEEL AT HOME.

Written by Darren Elms | Photographed by Shane O'Donnell





**Paul Mance remembers walking around his father’s Hermosa Beach deli and market as early as age 5. “It was all family that worked there then. It was my uncles, cousins, and my grandfather was around,” he says.**

His dad, Michael Angelo “Mickey” Mance, was a musician as a young man but shied away from the artist lifestyle. He opened Mickey’s Italian Deli & Pizzeria in 1953 so he could spend time with his family.

“What my dad did was unbelievable,” Paul shares. “When he first opened, he worked day and night, so his friend wanted to take him away on a fishing trip to Catalina. My dad went to lay down on the boat, and when he woke up they were already on their way home. He slept through the whole trip.”

Paul worked at the deli all through his childhood, into high school and summers back home from college. By the ’80s he was working full time alongside his dad, uncles and brother-in-law. He asked his dad how to run the business, and Mickey replied, “Watch me and find out.”

“He wanted us to figure it out,” Paul says. “My dad was ‘the guy,’ and he would always be ‘the guy.’”

Mickey continued to work at the deli all the way through the late ’90s. “Then he got sick, and we lost him in 2001,” says Paul. “I questioned myself. I’d sit in the office, look at his picture and ask, ‘What do I do?’”

Remembering how his dad ran the business, Paul immediately stepped in—making discoveries until he caught on. Like Mickey, there were times he struggled to find time off, but he still prioritized his family and made sure he was there for his kids’ games.

Paul’s son, also named Mickey, grew up in the same Rancho Palos Verdes house that his parents still live in today. “I can remember coming down to Hermosa when we were really young,” he says. “All my cousins and I would go to Mickey’s, jump into the kitchen and make pizzas with the team before heading to the beach.”

Like his dad, he would spend summers working at

the deli while attending college in San Diego. Back in the South Bay in 2014, Mickey began work at a digital marketing and advertising agency in Torrance.

While there, he helped with various things at Mickey’s Italian Deli including getting their digital presence up to date, restructuring the catering menu and offerings, setting up a new POS system and up-grading some equipment in the store.

“My dad never pressured me to join the family business, but during that time—as we were making all these improvements—I saw a huge opportunity to continue growing the business,” he says. “I also felt a strong calling to carry on my grandfather’s legacy. By 2016 I made the decision to come on full time, and I’ve been here ever since.”

Working with his son, Paul soon realized Mickey was more like his dad than he was. “I feel so safe with Mickey running things,” he shares. “We’re a lot different in personality—I’m more emotional while he’s very calm and collected.”

Mickey’s presence has not only enhanced the business, but it has also given Paul much-needed time off to travel with his wife to Italy and elsewhere. Knowing that his dad wouldn’t be at the deli forever, Mickey also recognized a need for a business partner to continue the family legacy.

Mickey met Justin Essman through his wife, Bree, when they both attended Long Beach State. “We got along right away,” he recalls. “We both had grown up in hospitality and became close friends—grabbing lunch, talking through ideas, even traveling together. It was a true friendship from the start.”

Born in Santa Monica but raised in Palm Desert, Justin grew up around his parent’s estate and consignment store at El Paseo. His mother, Emma, came from Bologna, Italy, to Los Angeles with her parents—master tailors who helped create costumes for the original Main Street Electrical Parade at Disneyland. Justin’s father, Rick, hailed from Long Island, New York, and made his way out to California, finding a place in the jewelry business.

Like it was for Mickey, Italian culture was a major







influence throughout Justin’s upbringing. “I developed a deep appreciation for authentic Italian food, European fashion and traditions rooted in family and hospitality,” he says. “I was lucky enough to spend time in Italy as a child, learning the language and connecting with my extended family, but more importantly the culture and way of life that allows you to connect with all walks of life. I can connect very specific and personally influential moments in my life to meals and holidays, and that is something deeply ingrained in every fiber in my body.”

With uncles behind a series of Italian restaurants called Spumoni on the Westside, Justin also spent many summers working with his family at their businesses. Though originally enrolled at Long Beach State to study film, he found himself drawn to the hospitality program and made a pivot.

His first job in college was checking IDs at the front door of Panama Joe’s in Belmont Shore, which had been recently acquired by the family that owned Baja Sharkeez. “It wasn’t glamorous, but it was the beginning of my journey into the industry I now love,” he says.

His relationship with Sharkeez would flourish over the years, eventually leading to an operating partner role and helping launch Tower 12 in Hermosa Beach.

“It was one of the most challenging and rewarding projects I had taken on up to that point,” he shares. “The tools, structure and business mentorship I received from Sharkeez—especially from Greg Newman and the team at the corporate office—played a foundational role in preparing me for any opportunity in the hospitality industry.”

It wasn’t until COVID-19 hit that Mickey and Justin first discussed the idea of opening a restaurant together. “As crazy as it sounds, all of our industry being completely closed down is what sparked us having the conversation,” says Mickey. “What started as an off-the-cuff comment turned into a real conversation and eventually led us to where we are today.”

For Justin, the pandemic forced a deep reflection. “Arguably one of the hardest professional decisions I’ve ever made was stepping away from the Sharkeez family—an organization and group of people that had

helped shape my career,” he says. “But ultimately I made a decision I felt was best for my family and our future. I wanted to create a life that hopefully would eventually allow for more flexibility and the opportunity to be present with my family—and with the kids we hoped to have one day. That clarity gave me the confidence to take a leap and rip the Band-Aid, and I’m grateful every day that I did.”

What started as a casual friendship evolved into a partnership and business called Bella Vita Hospitality. Mickey and Justin, together with Paul and an incredible team of business and culinary talent, set out to create an ecosystem of restaurants—both casual and full-service—and catering services, starting here in the South Bay.

“You often hear cautionary tales about mixing business with friendship, but I can genuinely say we got lucky,” says Justin. “We share the same core values: family, integrity, work ethic and a drive to constantly improve—not just for ourselves but for our team and the communities we work in. One philosophy we both believe in is the 1% rule: the idea of striving to be just 1% better every day.”

“It became clear to me very quickly that our relationship was strongest during the most challenging times, and that’s rare,” says Mickey. “I don’t want to speak for him, but I believe it comes from the deep respect we have for each other, both professionally and personally. I really feel like he’s part of my family.”

While the deli found its footing through the pandemic, Mickey and Justin sought a space for their first concept together—one that combined great food, a welcoming environment and a big emphasis on service and hospitality.

“Originally we developed an Italian concept, and we loved the Riviera Village,” Mickey shares. “When we found the space, it wasn’t the right fit for Italian. So we developed Vida based on what we thought would be a great fit for both the location and the neighborhood.”

Adds Justin, “We went all in on a modern Mexican concept, inspired by the flavors of Baja California with subtle nods to East L.A. taco carts and some creative



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fusions along the way.”

Building on that success, they opened Salt & Pearl when a space opened nearby and created an elevated seafood and steak restaurant accessible to everyone.

“Working with Vanrooy Design Group, we envisioned a room where Ernest Hemingway and Gatsby might host a cocktail party together, with *The Old Man and the Sea* providing the fresh catch. That’s the vibe we wanted: intimate, nostalgic and full of character,” explains Justin.

The cocktail program, created by beverage director Kenneth Gray, became the final layer. His reproofed cocktail program enhances the guest experience—a refined approach that starts with high-proof spirits and then slightly lowers the alcohol by volume (ABV) to create cocktails that are spirit-forward yet smooth and sessionable.

In a few short years, Bella Vita has assembled an amazing team of 100 employees across three restaurants, the catering division and the corporate team. Some have been part of the family for more than 30 years.

“There’s a good chance you’ve met our manager, Gonzalo. He started working here in 1990, which is the year I was born,” says Mickey. “I don’t know Mickey’s

Deli without Gonzalo. A big reason I want to continue growing our business is to give back to people like him, who have given so much to help us get to where we are.”

There’s also a new Mickey’s Deli location coming to South Bay in the near future.

As was a priority with both Mickey’s dad and grandfather, both partners still carve out quality time for their growing families. Justin and his wife, Elena, live with daughter Milana in Redondo, just a short drive to the restaurants, and keep Sundays sacred for family. Mickey and Bree are raising two daughters in South Redondo, not far from where he grew up.

“I feel strongly that this is the season of my life to put my head down and build both professionally and at home with my family,” he says. “I feel incredibly fortunate to come into work each day, spend time with my dad and continue building on my grandfather’s legacy. It’s something I’m extremely proud of.”

Paul knows none of this would be possible without the vision of one man. “My dad did this. He made it happen, and we carried on,” he says. “There was only one Michael Angelo ‘Mickey’ Mance—probably one of the brightest and kindest businessmen I’ve ever met in my life.” ■

