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El Centro Empresarial Helps Focus Urban Entrepreneurial Lens

Issued by: Justin A. Smith
Smithj@uwm.edu or 414-227-3153

For Sonia and Peter Sandroni, making their mark in the community means contributing to the culture of the city. Peter, a Milwaukee native, and his wife Sonia, born in Bogota, Columbia, are the newest entrepreneurial duo driving Milwaukee's diverse food scene. Look for La Merenda, Walker's Point's newest upscale eatery to open in late November.

The couple says they want to open La Merenda because they believe the city has such an inviting culture and open heart that they feel like the restaurant will be right at home. "We like the Milwaukee, and with all the festivals there is a feeling of openness and that is welcoming for us to try something new," says owner Sonia Sandroni.

While Peter does have a BS in Political Science from Marquette University, two years of culinary education from Kendall College, and a lifetime of experience running his family's restaurant in Atlanta Georgia under his belt; he has no experience in starting his own business. Sonia, who also has a strong drive to succeed, finished her BS in Industrial Engineering from Javeriana University in Bogota, Colombia and an MS in Management from Southern Technical University near Atlanta Georgia. Sonia's hard work earned her a top position as a project manager at Rockwell Automation, but she too has no experience in pursuing entrepreneurial routes.

To help bridge the gap between hard working idea holders and true entrepreneurs, the Sandroni's searched out the help of El Centro Empresarial, the Center for Entrepreneurship, at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee School of Continuing Education. El Centro is a collaborative initiative that partners the resources of UWM, the US Small Business Administration and business partners in the Southeastern Wisconsin community. The Business Plan Development course is lead by Nelson Soler, Director and Chief Instructor at El Centro. The Sandroni's say that course helped get them get ball rolling on creating the business plan that would secure their dream.

The Sandroni's managing partners Nick and Melissa Cataldo also finished Soler's business plan class. According to Peter Sandroni, the course was instrumental in helping us put this whole dream into action. "The business plan class helps you develop a well thought out and financially sound business plan. It keeps you focused on the results and forces you to get answers to the tough questions that come up during the process," says Peter. "I can not give this program enough credit for the focus that it gave us."

Soler says he is not surprised by the return on the investment for the Sandroni's. "Peter and Sonia came in here with a dream and a focus and they succeeded because they had the drive to follow through," says Soler. "These are the types of results that motivated people get. And the Sandroni's are definitely focused and motivated."

For the Sandroni's the focus right now is on getting the doors of the restaurant open by January. They believe the restaurant is a perfect place to host post holiday gatherings because La Merenda is Italian for "early snack" and it refers to an Italian custom of early evening socializing amongst friends and family.

"La Merenda is something like an Italian family happy hour," says Sonia Sandroni, "Perfect for our Tapas style menu and upscale atmosphere."

After a small parking lot snafu, the Sandroni's say that everything is smooth rolling right now. They expect other problems to arise, but say they feel confident and prepared after going through all the steps in the business plan class. "Nelson definitely put us in touch with the right people says Peter. I feel like there is no issue in this business that we cannot face with confidence after taking the class."

La Merenda is the brain-child of Peter and Sonia Sandroni, but this is not the first time the El Centro has helped to make urban entrepreneur's dreams come true. With a portfolio that focuses on urban businesses, El Centro is quickly becoming an epicenter in the ripples of expansion for entrepreneurial opportunities in Milwaukee.

For more information about Peter and Sonia Sandroni, La Merenda restaurant or Nelson Soler and El Centro Empresarial, please contact Nelson Soler at nsoler@uwm.edu or 414-227-3105. ***Photo Caption 1* The new home of La Merenda Restaurant. Opening January 2007. *Photo Caption 2* What will become the main dining room of La Merenda.**