



Photos by Charles Ludeke

A WINNING RECIPE

FIU alumnus Anthony Leone's healthy fast-food restaurant is poised to become a household name

By Sissi Aguila '99, MA '08

We've all read the restaurant horror stories. You think you're eating healthy and it turns out that chicken wrap has more fat than a Big Mac.

One day, after watching a New York City diner cook drench his egg white omelet in oil, Anthony Leone '91 said no more. He realized it was reasonable to expect seemingly healthy food – like a chicken wrap – to be, well, healthy. He wanted to know what was in his food, too. If that egg white omelet had been cooked behind closed doors, he'd never have known how much saturated fat and calories were secretly being packed into his meal.

The FIU School of Hospitality and Tourism Management graduate came up with a concept for a new restaurant – one that seems almost a contradiction – healthy fast food. It would operate with total transparency and everything on the menu, from burgers to fries, would be less than 500 calories.

The first Energy Kitchen opened in 2003. Today, it is poised to become a household name. Leone has more than 70 in development across the country. Fellow FIU alumnus Justo Luis Pozo III has purchased six franchises for South Florida. The first opens in Pinecrest this year.

"I'm an innate entrepreneur," says Leone. "I like to think outside the box. There was nothing out there at the time like what we're doing."

Leone believes "fast food" doesn't have to be "fat food." Everything on the menu is grilled, baked or steamed and never fried. And the kitchen is wide open so patrons can see how their meals are prepared.

You can't make "bad" choices at Energy Kitchen. Right there on the menu, customers can see how many calories are in their bison cheesesteak wrap and the complete nutritional information.



432 cal
Thai Chicken Wrap



465 cal
Supreme Sirloin Burger

With a Supreme Sirloin Burger even Ronald McDonald would enjoy, taste has not been sacrificed. The "healthy casual dining" restaurant has gained a cult following among New Yorkers, including celebrities Hugh Jackman, Uma Thurman and Nicole Kidman.

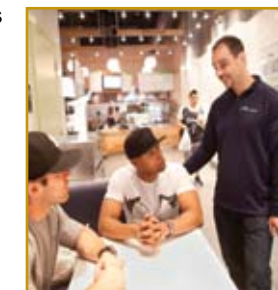
Using his culinary background from FIU, Leone developed most of the items on the menu in his kitchen by trial and error. But the industrious Leone is quick to point out that his success is a product of adjusting course when necessary and listening to the right people.

When the Queens, N.Y., native first started his business, the focus was on smoothies. As winter approached, he realized no one would buy smoothies in a foot of snow. So he made food the focus. The restaurant was first named Liquid Lab. Everyone thought it was a juice bar or a liquor store, says Leone. So he did a college branding exercise and offered free lunch for a month to the customer who came up with a name. Loyal customers

voted on Energy Kitchen.

Recently Leone partnered with Mike Repole, the co-founder and former president of Glacéau VitaminWater. Repole, a longtime customer, told Leone he wanted to be a part of the next billion-dollar brand: Energy Kitchen.

Repole, who now owns a slight majority of the company, has helped make it more



"At FIU I learned management. My strength is managing people."

trendy and brought in a marketing firm to re-energize the brand. The walls of the chic franchises are peppered with mottos like: All calories are not created equal; Better burgers no longer a fat chance.

Leone says success is about surrounding yourself with the right people. "At FIU, I learned management. Did I take cooking courses? Absolutely. But it's not my

strength. My strength is managing people."

Energy Kitchen office manager Veleniss Inoa says Leone's passion is contagious. "He has a great heart. He's a firm believer in the brand and he's made us all believers."

Longtime customer Dave Gise says if he could eat at Energy Kitchen seven days a week, he would. The personal trainer adds, "This is how I instruct my clients to eat!"

Pozo, the owner of the Pinecrest Energy Kitchen, is exploring five other South Florida locations in Aventura, Bal Harbour, Coral Gables, Midtown and South Miami. He learned about Energy Kitchen while he was looking to start

a business in the healthy-eating market. Pozo immediately flew up to New York to meet the founder not knowing he was an FIU grad as well.

Pozo knew right away he wanted to be a part of Leone's vision for healthy fast food. For Leone, Energy Kitchen is more than a business. It's a mission: "I want to change the eating habits of America."