

## FAST CASUAL · MARKETING

# ‘Real Bread. Real Bakery.’: Inside Focaccio’s bet on getting back to the bakery

A year into a quiet turnaround, the chain is making its in-store baking the entire story — wagering that craft, not convenience, is what wins guests back. New CMO Elena Castellanos explains the play.

By **Marcus Hale** | Executive Editor | May 12, 2022 | 5 Min Read



At a Focaccio’s bakery-café, breads are mixed, fermented and baked on site each day — the operating model now at the heart of the chain’s “Real Bread. Real Bakery.” platform. | Photo courtesy of Focaccio’s Old World Bakery & Café

A year after quietly pulling the grain bowls off its menu, Focaccio’s Old World Bakery & Café is now saying out loud what it wants to be: a bakery. This spring the chain launched “Real Bread. Real Bakery.,” a brand platform built entirely around the one thing it spent the mid-2010s de-emphasizing — bread mixed, fermented and baked from scratch inside its own cafés.

The campaign is the first major move from Elena Castellanos, who joined Focaccio’s as chief marketing officer in late 2021 after 12 years building premium, heritage-driven food brands at Mondelez. Her read on the problem was blunt: the chain had a real advantage and had stopped talking about it.

“Somewhere along the way we got a little embarrassed about being a bakery, and we started chasing whatever the category was doing,” Castellanos said. “But the bread was always the point. Our cafés still mix it, ferment it slowly, and bake it on site every day — most of our competitors gave that up years ago. ‘Real Bread. Real Bakery.’ isn’t a slogan we dreamed up in a conference room. It’s just finally telling the truth about how we operate.”

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Elena Castellanos, Chief Marketing Officer, Focaccio’s

For the first time, the marketing leans hard into process — the long, slow fermentation, the stone ovens, the daily bake. New menu boards, packaging and advertising all foreground the bakery rather than the broader fast-casual menu. The chain also made its Stone Oven Flatbread, introduced as a limited-time offer, a permanent fixture after it outsold expectations.

Bringing that message to life across more than 1,000 cafés fell to the brand marketing team. “The hard part was never the advertising — it was making every café feel like a bakery again,” said Steve Perkins, Focaccio’s senior manager of brand marketing. “We moved the ovens and the bread back to the center of the experience, retrained crews on the story behind the fermentation, and let the smell of baking bread do a lot of the selling.”

The repositioning extends a course-correction CEO Dianne Marshall began in 2021, when Focaccio’s retired its wellness-era menu. Castellanos credits Marshall for clearing the path. “Dianne handed me a brand that had already decided to stop apologizing for itself,” she said. “My job was to give it a voice.”

Privately held, Focaccio’s does not release sales and declined to share specifics, but said guest response and repeat visits had improved in the months since the platform launched. The bet runs against much of fast casual, where chains have leaned into automation, off-site production and speed. Castellanos is unbothered. “Everyone’s optimizing for throughput,” she said. “We’re optimizing for the reason people fell in love with us in the first place.”

Whether craft can scale profitably across a national footprint is the open question. For now, Focaccio’s is betting the answer is yes — and that the smell of bread baking at 7 a.m. is an advantage no competitor can pull out of a freezer.

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Focaccio’s Old World Bakery &amp; Café