

Immigration Law \approx Foodservice

Immigrant Profile: *Natalia Nastovici*

by **Becki L. Young**

From studying economics in communist Romania to owning a thriving small restaurant in Frederick, Md., Natalia Nastovici's life has changed dramatically over the past few decades.

Natalia and her daughter Catie arrived in the United States in August 1998. They joined Natalia's then-husband, a documentary filmmaker who had defected from Romania in 1986, and made his way to the U.S. through South Africa and then Spain.

The family lived in New York City for a few years, where they concluded that the key to success in America was entrepreneurship. They decided to leave New York to find a small American town where they could provide their daughter with a good education and a true dose of "American culture."

In 1991 Natalia's sister Afina Lupulescu, a geologist, came to visit from Romania. Sightseeing tours were not on Afina's agenda; what she really wanted was to visit the Carnegie Foundation in Washington DC. Natalia contacted the foundation to arrange a visit; she accompanied her sister on the trip and decided DC was where she wanted to settle.

Natalia sent her husband and daughter to scout out a new home, and they chose Frederick, a small town about 45 miles away from both Baltimore and Washington DC. Natalia felt right at home in Frederick, which reminded her of her hometown in Romania (40 miles away from the capital, Bucharest).

Although Natalia and her husband had no experience in the restaurant business, they had a few characteristics that led to their ultimate success: willingness to work hard, a unique business idea, and an unwavering commitment to quality. In 1992 they opened a soft gourmet pretzel shop on North Market Street in

historic Frederick. Natalia oversaw the creative side of the business and her husband handled the administrative side.

Natalia says she and her husband "were probably the only immigrants in Frederick at that point," and she is extremely grateful to the residents of Frederick for embracing them and their business, and helping it grow over the years. As time passed the restaurant introduced new menu items including ice cream, calzones, hot dogs wrapped in pretzel dough and cheese, and finally pizza. This last menu item was a challenge – Natalia wanted to serve "real Italian pizza with real Italian pizza sauce" based on a recipe she found in an old Italian cookbook – but the customers complained about the onions in the sauce, so she took them out, and continued to tweak the recipe, adding her own spices, until she came

up with the current version, which was and continues to be a big hit.

As housing prices increased in the nearby suburbs of DC and Baltimore throughout the 90s, more people began moving to Frederick – and soon Natalia and her husband found they were no longer the only immigrants in town. After a few years the restaurant became "a destination" – historic Frederick is largely a walking town so Natalia and her husband knew they had made it when they noticed that customers were driving to the restaurant!

Natalia says that only two other restaurants in Frederick have been around as long as **Pretzel & Pizza Creations**: Bushwaller's (an Irish pub), and The Orchard (a vegetarian restaurant). Most of the current restaurants serve some variation on American food, although there is now a Cuban restaurant and a few Mexican ones.

A true entrepreneur, Natalia has ambitious plans for expansion of Pretzel & Pizza Creations, and is interested in finding investors/partners to help her with this goal. Her motto is "fresh and on the spot; nothing frozen ever." The Fredericktonians have taken to her prod-



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ucts and she believes others will, too.

Natalia, her former husband and her daughter Catie have all become US citizens; Natalia recalls her 1991 naturalization ceremony in Frederick with fondness; she says many of her customers came to watch the ceremony and show their support. Catie graduated from Syracuse University with a degree in English & Business Management in 2007; she is now a Manhattan-based Marketing Representative for Flying Dog Brewery, a Frederick microbrewery. Natalia's sister Afina also immigrated to the US; she has since received her PhD and become a US citizen.

For immigrants who want to follow in her footsteps, Natalia advises them to "work hard, be serious, and know what they want to do and where they want to go." As for the immigrants she has hired over the years, she has only positive things to say; the foreigners on her staff have been uniformly reliable, serious, and grateful for the opportunity to work in this country.

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