



## BAMA PEOPLE

### JOHN CASSIMUS

*Family tradition,  
made from scratch*

by Rachael Crawley

**T**he importance of family and tradition is instilled in every graduate with a University of Alabama diploma. But for John Cassimus, it was in his mother's kitchen where he first learned these principles that he has carried into building a successful restaurant business modeled after the home cooking he grew up on.

Cassimus is the owner of Zoës Kitchen, named for his mother, which offers homegrown recipes and ingredi-

ents derived from family dishes.

A native of Birmingham, Ala., Cassimus, 40, obtained a finance degree from UA in 1990 and was on the Tide football team during his time as a student. He also credits that education for his accomplishments and his success in the restaurant business. "First of all, the lessons learned while playing football have carried me through many tough situations and instilled many fundamental building blocks for success. My business degree has been instrumental in growing my business. The strategy class Dr. Lonnie Strickland taught really gave me the tools that we use on a weekly basis in making strategic decisions for Zoës," Cassimus said.

It began in 1999, when he decided to take over a business his mother first started in Birmingham that served only lunch. "My mother had a unique concept that had, in a short time, become an institution for lunch in Birmingham. It seemed like there was a lot of potential for growth, and I wanted to start [a similar] business and work for myself," he said. Today, Zoës Kitchen serves customers from late morning through evening.

Both Zoë and her son knew that balance makes for a happy life, says the restaurant's website, including balance in physical needs for good health. So the first Zoës Kitchen was founded as a rare source of convenient, tasty food that was developed to be healthy as well. They hired a nutritionist to analyze the nutritional content of the recipes, and the result was a simple classification of menu items geared to today's dietary needs.

Zoës has quickly grown into a successful chain, operating 17 restaurants in six states across

the U.S. "My mother always helped me with any new item that we introduced and gave overall advice about food quality and preparation. My father [Marcus] truly built the model from scratch. He basically took my mom's ideas and made them come to life in an efficient method of delivery," Cassimus said.

The menu consists of fresh salads and sandwiches, including a turkey pita, chicken roll-up and marinated slaw. "We serve salads and sandwiches with a Greek twist. Everything is made from scratch on site daily, and all of the recipes are originals. Zoës Kitchen serves food that customers describe as fresh, healthy, tasty and unique," said Jennifer Mims, real estate coordinator for the enterprise. A native of Clanton, Ala., Mims is also a UA alum, receiving a bachelor's in finance in 2003 and an M.B.A. in 2005.

Cassimus believes that the tradition of Zoës Kitchen will continue long into the future because of the quality products offered. "I want to continue to grow while increasing value for the customer, our employees and our brand. Zoës Kitchen will become the leader in fast, casual dining, setting the bar for the best tasting, most addictive food that is made from scratch, along with offering unparalleled customer service," he said.

Not only is Cassimus focused on tending to his customers, he is also committed to giving back to the community by contributing to charities and organizations. "We like to get involved with the community, so we held a fundraiser at Zoës Kitchen [in Dallas] to raise money for The Rise School of Dallas, which is the sister organization of The Rise School in Tuscaloosa," Mims said of one such event. It seems to go without saying in Cassimus' world that family values extend far beyond the kitchen door.

For more details and restaurant locations, visit [www.zoeskitchen.com](http://www.zoeskitchen.com).

