



ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

in Celebration of the
City of Sugar Land
60th Anniversary



CITY OF SUGAR LAND

Victor Litwinenko

Co-Owner,
Japaneiro's,
Guru, Jupiter



GOODSILL: Are you from Sugar Land, Victor?

LITWINENKO: I was born in Venezuela and grew up there. We moved to the U.S. in 1994 when I was 13 years old. We came directly to Sugar Land. My dad was in the oil business working for Citgo and was transferred here. I went to 8th grade at Sugar Land Middle School, Kempner High School for 9th grade, and then transferred to Clements and finished high school there. After that I went to the University of Houston. So I never left! I came here and stayed here.

Things got rough in Venezuela while we were here so we were better off to stay here after my dad retired. A lot of the people that he worked with in Venezuela started to struggle so he didn't want to take the family back there.

GOODSILL: Have you ever been back to Venezuela?

LITWINENKO: The last time I went back was before 2001. Since it's been bad and I haven't been back.

GOODSILL: It must be hard to watch that and hear the news about it.

LITWINENKO: It's sad. I have a huge family, 45 cousins at last count. They're in Colombia, they're Miami, because if you could get away, you did get away. And for the people who are still there - it's horrible. My mom is the most devastated since it was her home. It's my home too, but it's not the same. I speak Spanish, which it is really helpful in the restaurant business.

GOODSILL: What did you excel at in school? Or what did you study?

LITWINENKO: I've always been good at math. For some reason I remember seeing Texas Instruments right there off of US-59 and I thought I would go into IT and work at Texas Instruments. I had already planned on never leaving Sugar Land. Then it turned out I wasn't so good with computer language. It is not as math oriented as I thought it would be, so I switched to operations management. That really led to the restaurant business.

GOODSILL: How are those two things related?

LITWINENKO: It's good for scheduling, labor, labor control processes, work flow, cost of goods and how to manage them. Look at a restaurant basically as a factory. A Taco Bell, a clothing manufacturer, or auto manufacture all have the goods which come in, get processed, and get made into an end product, in our case food. I studied how to set up the work flow. A lot of people think we are chefs or we went to culinary school. Actually, neither of us has a culinary background. I have the operations background and Robert is a creative mastermind. When it comes to design and creation and menu, he's the guy. I fill in the operations side of it and it works out. We hire a chef; we bring in new people. We have team members that makes it all happen. By no means is it a solo act.

Before Japaneiro's, we opened a restaurant in New Territory called Sasu. It was very small. It was our "let's try the restaurant thing and if it doesn't work out, but let's not be bankrupt afterwards." It was 1100 square feet with a short-term lease. We built it out as simply as possible. I didn't even eat sushi at the time. Robert got me into it. He was a stockbroker and was tired of it. He always wanted to do a restaurant kind of thing. So we put it together and tried it out. We started getting a pretty good following, but we realized it was too small.

GOODSILL: If a restaurant is too small, you can't make enough money off of it?

LITWINENKO: Yes. On the weekends when it fills up, you are limited to the capacity. You can't sell a lot. And we were inside New Territory; not off the freeway and not getting as much traffic. But it was a good stepping stone. We sold sushi and only sushi. Sasu is a type of blowfish in Japanese. And that just a silly name. We just make up silly names.

GOODSILL: Tell me how you got introduced to Robert.

LITWINENKO: Robert is married to my sister. They moved to Sugar Land in 2001. He figured that sushi was getting trendy and there was barely any sushi in the Houston area. Café Japon was one and Miyako were the only two places and they had very sub-par quality sushi. Robert has been to Seattle and New York, and he knew quality sushi. He was disappointed in the sushi here. He also realized that not a lot of people knew about sushi so it was going to be a struggle. That's why we started with something little, to see how it worked.

Japaneiro's will be 16 years old in December, so Sasu was probably around 2002. then. We realized that not everybody likes sushi. We would have couples come in and one would love sushi and the other would sit there and pick at a couple of things. Same thing with kids. So we realized that just serving sushi wouldn't reach the whole market. We were limited with the space at Sasu; the kitchen was very small; we couldn't have a hood. So we couldn't really cook. When we heard about Town Square. If we were going to do it, this was the time. We knew when we opened another restaurant we needed to make it much bigger and have a proper kitchen,

Because we are South American we figured we would do South American food. Growing up in Venezuela we know Latin food is very simple food. If we could incorporate that into the sushi, then maybe people would be pretty happy about it.



Robert White
Co-Owner, Japaneiro's, Guru, Jupiter



I have the operations background and Robert is a creative mastermind.

Victor Litwinenko



That is where the idea of fusion started. We would fuse sushi with south American food. At the time people thought we were insane! Sushi and South American food? Sixteen years ago it was, "This will never work. Nobody eats a churrasco with sushi on top." That's what they thought, that we would do a meat and put sushi on top. Just because it is fusion doesn't mean you are grabbing two things and smashing them together. We have both things and a few menu items have things like plantains in sushi rolls. There is the South American side and the sushi side of the kitchen and then we play in the middle. We have very traditional items also. Fusion doesn't scare anybody nowadays.

The Sugar Land mall was just a few years old when we started. [Editor's note: It opened in March 1996] If you wanted to see a movie or buy a car, you had to drive to Houston. And the restaurants

were scattered, there were no clusters. Robert saw Town Center as a new concept also. He saw one in North Carolina and thought it was beautiful; a cluster of restaurants and boutiques in a pedestrian outdoor area. He was hoping that's what our town square would be like. We thought if we could get into Town Square, it could be our big break.

We tried to get in but they wanted RA Sushi. RA Sushi already had a restaurant in Houston. I think they were talking to Café Japon also. They wanted a sushi restaurant and an Italian restaurant, etc. They wanted one of each kind. We weren't a "name" at the time. RA was a name. Café Japon was a name. But luckily those restaurants had turned it down and that's when we kind of slid in. The city took a gamble on us. We had no history at all.

GOODSILL: What was it like, negotiating with the city? Was that your job?

LITWINENKO: No, it was Robert's job. I was a spring chicken back then. He had more business experience and office experience. He is 10 years older than I am. He got all the documents set up and the LLC set up. He negotiated with the Town Square people and we got the lease.

It was a big deal and we were scared! We opened Sasu with cash. For Japaneiro's, we needed a bank loan and got turned down by a bunch of banks. But we finally got an SBA (Small Business) loan and that's how it all started. It was a small loan and we scrimped as much as we could. We built as much as we could by hand. We rented jackhammers and took turns using it, just to save costs.

GOODSILL: How many square feet is Japaneiro's?

LITWINENKO: 3400. The food was South American and sushi but we didn't want it to sound too Japanese. We wanted it to have a Latin Hispanic flair to it. In Brazil, the Portuguese language ends many words in 'eiro'. We started just playing around with names. One name was Rio de Japon, like Rio de Janero but it was a little hard to pronounce and three words were too many. Somewhere along the line we came up with Japaneiro's and it had that Latin/Hispanic/Portuguese sound to it but clearly Japan was the main name. So we stuck with it. People call it Habanero's and think it is Mexican food with spicy peppers. It took a little while for people to understand what we were. But it's a made-up name.

GOODSILL: What was it like when you first opened, the first week?

LITWINENKO: People were super excited. When we were building, people would stop by and knock on the door. All our customers from Sasu would come in and check it out.

GOODSILL: Had you closed Sasu by that time?

LITWINENKO: We kept it open while we had Japaneiro's at first but we realized we were a small team and couldn't run two restaurants. We were sacrificing things, going back and forth. So we sold it to one of our sushi guys and he went with it and we focused on Japaneiro's. Because we had Sasu we already had a small clientele that was willing to try Japaneiro's. We opened December 23rd, the most horrible time to open! We had no idea what we were doing. And the next day we were closed, and also the day after that. What restaurant opens and three days later opens for the second day? But everybody kept knocking on the doors asking when were we going to open.

The first couple of months were very good, but just like any other restaurant, you get three months of a honeymoon and then reality kicks in. That first two years were rough. Running up the credit cards, getting more loans. Everybody but us was getting paid. We were buying as much as we could to keep it going. We did see that sales were slowly increasing, so we saw hope for the future. But we didn't see a guarantee by any means.

GOODSILL: How long a lease did you sign?

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LITWINENKO: We signed a standard length lease with tough terms because we didn't have any previous history. It was going to work or we were going to have to start over at zero somewhere else. Because we have more history now, we get better terms, but not at that time.

GOODSILL: And it turned out to be a very good location. Tell us where the restaurant is.

LITWINENKO: 2168 Texas Drive. It faces Highway 6 in Town Square. When we opened, it was very empty over there. We had the endcaps: Jamba Juice and Café Express, and we were in the middle. Sadly both of those places are gone now.

GOODSILL: Was Café Express's location better than yours because it was on a corner?

LITWINENKO: Café Express had a good location. But moving is too expensive. We also don't know that it would attract new traffic. Just because you are bigger doesn't mean people will come more often and bring more people and spend more money. It may be the same amount of people. The expense of moving even 100 feet over would be \$500,000.

When we got here, we were with PF Chang's, the Marriott, Baker Street, Starbucks, Café Express and Jamba Juice. That was our group. We all knew each other and would hang out. All the industry people would go to PF Chang's or Baker Street and have drinks afterwards. Eventually the empty spaces filled in.

GOODSILL: That was an interesting time in Sugar Land's history. It was creating something out of nothing to make Town Square.

LITWINENKO: Yes. This was a cow pasture before. I remember Highway 6 when it was just a two lane road. It's wonderful to see how many people go back and forth now. It has worked out for us.

GOODSILL: Has the business changed in sixteen years?

LITWINENKO: The idea is still the same. The menu has changed entirely based on what people are asking for. Our wine list has changed quite a bit, our drink choices have changed. Tito's vodka wasn't around back then. We try to stay relevant with what is popular, what people are asking for. The easiest thing is to listen to your customers. It's hard to force somebody to eat something just because you like it. It's much easier to give them what they are asking for.

The wine list is a good example. I thought I knew about wine. "These are great wines that I love!" And then people started asking for Kendall Jackson. I'd say, "Kendall Jackson is not as good as the stuff I have!" Then I realized that that was what they wanted. What does it matter what I like? So we put Kendall Jackson on the list and it instantly became a best seller. When people started asking for La Crema, I thought "Oh, La Crema is SO common." Our second best seller is La Crema. If enough people ask for something, we put it on the list.

GOODSILL: Did running the restaurant consume the majority of your time?



When we opened the second restaurant, we realized there was no way we could grow if we were involved in the restaurants' day to day activities.

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LITWINENKO: At first, yes. It was horrible. I was recently married and at first you basically live at the restaurant. I was the general manager there and Robert was doing all the back of the house stuff. We were spending a lot of time there. When the Char House Restaurant went out of business there was a business opportunity. And we were scared to go anywhere else. So instead of doing another Japaneiro's in Katy or the Woodlands, we did something different right next door. It was already built out, which was a huge savings. We took the same idea of Sasu, bringing our existing clientele to try it out. We had all these customers who liked us. At the very least they would be willing to try it once. If we mess up, we mess up. So that's how we ended up opening Guru.

When we opened the second restaurant, we realized there was no way we could grow if we were involved in the restaurants' day to day activities. We realized I couldn't be a general manager here and be a general manager over there. So we promoted Robert's nephew, Jason Molinos, who had been with us since Sasu to be the general manager at Japaneiro's and we took another manager and promoted him to be general manager at Guru. Now we could oversee both restaurants. Both people had been working with us since we opened Japaneiro's so they knew our style and they knew how to take care of our guests.

Robert designed the restaurants, builds it out, and does the general contracting. When we first get open, I help train the staff. And then we release it to the general manager. They are responsible for changing the menu items based on what the guests are asking for. We are fusion guys. We decided we wanted to do proper high-end burgers. Five Guys had just opened and they were our stepping-stone into people willing to pay more than \$5 for a burger. We needed them first, before we could do it. Before that, Whataburger was the best burger you could get, in people's minds. Five Guys opened up that \$7-\$8 burger. So now we could do an \$8-\$9 burger. We do much higher quality meat than

everybody else; we use Texas Kobe. At the time it wasn't that easy to get. That is our standard meat for all the burgers.

Then there was the same dilemma that not everybody wants to eat a big, juicy burger. So we did crepes. It was simple enough that you could have savory crepes and sweet crepes. You can play with it to create a fusion. The people who don't like burgers get crepes. We always try to give them an option. And if you don't like burgers or crepes, hopefully you like sushi or South American food!

GOODSILL: There was a museum in Vermont that was trying to get more people to come visit. So they did exhibits that had opposing items, like Tiffany jewelry and Harley-Davidson motorcycles. Sounds like the same thing you are doing. How did you come up with the name, Guru?

LITWINENKO: That was Robert. I think his kids came up with it. We had a bunch of silly names and one day he said, "Listen. Let it sink in. Don't say anything yet. Guru." And he hung up. (laughter) Guru is kind of cool and it has a kind of hippyish vibe to it. And it is simple. Japaneiro's was too difficult and a lot of people misspelled it. So we decided to simplify things a little. Japaneiro's is a cool name but it needs to be easy for people to pronounce, to remember, to write down, to Google. As on line searches became more important everything needed to be Google-able. Facebook and Instagram are now BIG. We are taking on the trends. It's the best free marketing ever.

GOODSILL: Who manages that part of your business?

LITWINENKO: Each store stands on its own. Each has a chef, a general manager, an Instagram account, Facebook account, bookkeeping. Japaneiro's does very well and the bonus goes to those people. Guru does well, the bonus goes to those people. What they realize is they help each other out quite a bit. It is convenient to be able to say, "I ran out of ice or lettuce or whatever. Run some over from your location to mine." Or a busser or a dishwasher or a hostess or a manager, if they need people. It's very convenient to share marketing costs. Instead of printing 1,000 copies, print 5,000 and we'll split it.

We opened Guru about eight years after Japaneiro. It's been open about seven years. Then four or five years ago the Jupiter location, right on City Hall Plaza, became available. It was actually empty for a couple of years. Vineyard on the Square was in that location originally.

As Japaneiro's was doing well and Guru started doing well, we got the itch to open another location. We always say, "we're never going to open another restaurant" and then we do. The mistake Vineyard on the Square made was it was only for adults, 21 and older. The plaza is playing Finding Nemo on the weekends. For about two years after Vinyard closed the city was having events, like the Christmas tree lighting, the New Year's eve event right beside an empty space. The city came to us. and asked if we had any interest. They thought it could be a good spot.

At first we told them we thought it was too big. It was 4600 or 4800 square feet. They came back and pushed a little bit more. We had already seen somebody go out of business there and didn't see anybody interested in that space. You can't even park in front of it. You have to park and go all the way around to it. So we put it off. They came back again. We put it off again. Eventually, we decided to think about it. Not sign anything but think about what could possibly go there.

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And if you don't like burgers or crepes, hopefully you like sushi or South American food!

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It needed to be something suitable not just for kids but for the whole family. There are exclusivity rights related to the kinds of food served throughout Town Square so pizza wasn't available until Windy City went out of business. Not only did pizza become available, but their pizza oven became something we could buy super cheap! Pizza ovens are VERY expensive. That was one more step. Now we could do pizza. Customers started asking what the fusion was going to be. We said, "Pizza is enough!" Customers were saying, "No, pizza and what?" They sounded so disappointed when we said just pizza. You can put anything on pizza. We heard it enough, so okay, fine. We have to continue this fusion ridiculousness.

We plucked a manager, Jason Pena, from one of the restaurants and put him at Jupiter. He's the one who said, "Have you guys had chicken waffles?" That sounded insane. We'd never had it. He takes us to a restaurant and gives us chicken waffles. We see people going crazy over these chicken waffles. We started googling chicken waffles, seeing Instagram pictures of chicken waffles. Everybody is going crazy about these chicken waffles! Okay, chicken waffles it is.

GOODSILL: Are chicken waffles sweet?

LITWINENKO: Yes. Sweet. It has whipped cream. It will change your life! It is crazy. It doesn't make sense until you eat all the pieces together. You eat them all together and it is perfection. So it became pizza and waffles. We started building it out, setting it up, doing the promotions. Then we realized that the place already had a beer and wine license, which made it easier for us to acquire one. We sat down with TABC and it turns out that the rules for the length and area of your patio is from your storefront to the street. We said, "Are you saying that technically the plaza is our patio?" "Yes."

When it comes to selling alcohol, that is the rule. So we are looking at the plaza and across the street there was a different bar. "They can't cross the street and sell drinks?" "No." "What about the Marriott? They have a street, too. Can they come across and sell drinks?" "No." "So we're the ONLY place that can sell beer and wine to people on the plaza?" "Yes." Sold! I'm in. Get the thing. Apply for the beer and wine permit and we start construction and pizza and waffles it is. When we set up a beer thing out there, people look around and ask, "Is this legal? It seems so weird!" "Yes, this is our patio." We can't use glass containers, but people can walk into Jupiter, grab a glass of wine, put it in a plastic cup and walk outside and watch the movie, come back inside and drink again. That created this perfect flow. We have kids running around, we have parents grabbing drinks.

Parents can sit on the patio and eat something while the kids run around and get tired so when they get home they are sleepy. It became THE family restaurant. After that when we got bored again, other stuff happened. We opened two more places after that. It gets a little confusing.

GOODSILL: After Jupiter, what came next?

LITWINENKO: We wanted to do a cocktail bar, like a speakeasy. And that one closed. It was called The Ginger Mule. Like Moscow Mule and ginger beer is in the Moscow Mule so we called it The Ginger Mule.

GOODSILL: Why did it close? Did people not want to go to a speakeasy kind of place?



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LITWINENKO: People really liked it. The problem is when it comes to a bar, especially with craft cocktails, there aren't that many people drinking on Monday night or Tuesday night. We loved it and people loved it but we realized that as cool as it was, that concept needs to be inside the loop. We had it about two years. Also, two other similar craft cocktail bars opened in the Town Square with very similar offerings shortly after we opened The Ginger Mule. That certainly didn't help.

GOODSILL: Was it a bitter disappointment when you had to give it up?

LITWINENKO: If it had been Japaneiro's it would have been horrible. But now that we have three other locations doing well, this was kind of for fun. And it was a small location. We learned a lot. We had some good people and we had a good time. Our guests were great. And our guests always go to our other restaurants so we kept it in the family. But eventually we had to close down. We still have the location and we got bored, so instead of having an empty place, we thought, "Let's do a kolache and arepas places." Arepas are like a little tortilla but the tortilla is fluffier and soft. Between a tortilla and a fat bao, consistency-wise. And you fill it up with shredded beef or something like that. The restaurant's name was Kilo's. We chose that name because kolache uses the metric system (Polish) and arepas uses the metric system, so we wanted to incorporate that. That was our fusion. But literally, on day 1 we realized it wasn't going to work. We worked

so hard on this place and the menus and recipes. We had delicious kolaches with high end meat and cheeses inside. But we found out nobody wants to pay more than \$3 for a kolache, no matter what you put inside it. It could be stuffed with two pounds of lobster and they are not going to pay more than \$3. So this was an issue! We were pricing some kolaches at \$4.50 because there were shrimp in them, and people would say, "I'm not going to pay \$4.50." "Dude, it's got shrimp inside!" So we had to close down quickly. That was open for only three months. We had to stop the bleeding right away.

We used the location for private events for awhile. Lots of birthday parties, 40th, 50th, 60th parties. People had VJs (video jockeys), face painting, tea parties. It was really good for wedding rehearsal dinners. It was all word-of-mouth. Our GM from Japaneiro's has done a lot of catering through Japaneiro's so he became the event coordinator for that. We had a DJ on call. They had fun but it wasn't consistent enough. We would do a great Saturday but nothing the rest of the week.

That location had sort of became the Japaneiro's GM's location when he was organizing the private parties. He knew that space and he wanted us to give him a chance to run the new location. Recently we started eating poke'. We do research and development by eating stuff. So we are eating and looking around and we notice what they are doing right and what they are not. We are super critical when it comes to going to other restaurants. My wife hates that because it has ruined restaurants for us. Anyway, we go to the poke' place and we're eating and we like the stuff, but they are doing it this way and we should do it that way because it is better for flow, etc. Jason, the GM over here, is eating something and says, "It needs something. It needs a poquito bit of sauce." We speak Spanish so we're doing the Spanglish thing, we looked at each other and said, "Poquito! That's it!" We called the place Poketo.

When we started talking about it people wanted to know what the fusion was going to be. Our fusion is Korean beef, chimichuri chicken and pork, and broths!. It's like a Chipotle and a poke' place all in one. You can do a Chipotle style bowl. "but I don't like fish." Well, we have beef.

The Keto diet is really popular and it is very easily done in your poke' bowl. One thing that has helped us there is everybody has these crazy diets or are on a cleansing diet or some kind of restricted meals. "I'm anti this; I only eat when the light is blue." We can't keep up with this stuff. We have people asking if this is paleo 2.3 friendly. I don't know what that means! Just point at the things you can eat and we will put it in a bowl for you. Make whatever you think suits your dietary requirements. So the people who work at Poketo have simplest job ever.

Poketo has become the spot for all those vegans, vegetarians, Keto guys, and Paleo guys. They can have kombucha afterwards if they want. And if you don't have that much time for lunch, Poketo is the spot. You can be in and out quickly. You can take it back to the office to eat while you are working. Everything is to go. Even if you are eating there, it is in recyclable containers. We are big into recycling. It is a compostable bowl. It is made of soybeans. And so is the lid. It's good for Door Dash.

GOODSILL: Sounds like you are appealing to people who have certain dietary needs and are into fitness.

LITWINENKO: We are getting a lot of yoga people. They can really control what is going into their food. Nothing is fried. There is not as much risk of cross contamination. You aren't cutting anything right there; you aren't mixing anything for them. Everything is very virgin when you get it into your bowl. You pick the sauces you like. People are paying \$10 - \$11 a bowl so we can make money and pay the rent. It is fun to watch them make the first bowl and then literally come back two days later and make a tiny change to that bowl. They are trying to perfect their bowls. People get really good at it. "Hey can you do two little squeezes of that sauce, and then put that sauce on the rim right here?" We'll do whatever you want. Everybody is real finicky! "Can you put it on the side because I think that will be good, but I don't want to ruin it this time?" You get really good at making your poke' bowl, and when you want to switch it up, you switch it up. You can never get tired of it. You can switch the base, the sauces, the toppings, the ingredients, the proteins, whatever. There are a million things you can do.

GOODSILL: It's too bad you don't have very much passion for this career! (laughing)

LITWINENKO: Each time we open a place it is like starting over. Right now we are not opening any more restaurants. We are still perfecting this one. They are like children. They require some babysitting. People quit, things happen, somebody gets fired,

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somebody gets in a fight, there is always that going on. Human resources are the not so fun part of the job. We have to fire people, we have to hire people. Some people steal from us. We really like dealing with guests and seeing them excited about a new concept, making a bowl and really enjoying it. Fifteen years ago, if you took a picture of your food, you were a freak. Now it's a sign they really like it and they are going to show it to everybody. Very few people take a picture of something they don't like. If you see the phone come out, you know they are happy. Everything has changed.

So that's it. That's the four restaurants and that's where we are right now. Poketo just opened three months ago so it is very new to us. We are open 7 days a week, 11 - 9. The employees there are from Japaneiro, some from Guru, some from Jupiter. We didn't have to hire anybody. It's whoever needs more hours. They are already friendly, they know our guests. It's kind of cute when you go to a new place and "Hey, you're from Guru's!" It's a small family.

GOODSILL: Is there anything else you want to tell me about Robert?

LITWINENKO: He designs things and comes up with ideas that sound crazy at first but end up looking good. If you look at the locations, they are quirky. There are several walls at Jupiter that are just 2x4s stacked together with holes. When he explained it to me, I didn't understand it. Random 2x4s with holes in between? But it made perfect sense when I saw it.. You really don't want solid walls because you can't see the people. You don't want to "see" them but you want to be able to see what is happening over there. It helps the hostesses to see the locations while at the same time giving you enough privacy. It made perfect sense. At Guru he wanted white subway tiles everywhere. I thought that would look super boring and it would get really dirty. That's how I think. I think operationally and he thinks design. He did the subway tiles, they are glossy and easy to wipe, and they look amazing. So whatever he wants to do from now on is okay with me. If he wants hanging bulbs, hanging bulbs it is. None of those things make sense to me! Why would you want 47 hanging bulbs? They are a pain in the ass! "No, just wait." And they are at different heights. "I want this one here and this one a little higher and this one a little lower." "So now I've got to change 17 different levels of bulbs?" "Yes." I'm thinking, how many ladders am I going to need to be able to do this and he's thinking, it's going to look SO cool. That's how we work. When you go to Guru, look up and see all these lights at all different levels. 50 years ago all those lights needed to be perfectly aligned, at the same height, or the fung shui is would be all-wrong. Now if you have two lights that match up, that's no good.

We sell growlers, the big containers you fill up with beer to-go, at Guru. The lamp at the bar is the same hanging bulb with a growler on top of it with the bottom cut out of it, so the light goes through it. That was Robert's idea. I thought we were going to have shards of glass. "No, we're going to cut it and mold it right here with a little epoxy." I thought it was going to look terrible. But when you look at it, it is super cool. It has the logo on it. It is amazing. There are a bunch of things like that that he has come up with. That's how he keeps himself entertained.

GOODSILL: Does he do other architectural work?

LITWINENKO: He is very picky with his clients. He'll do cool residential or commercial that he feels will keep him motivated.



**I think operationally
and he thinks design.**

Victor Litwinenko



This takes us back to Japaneiro's, at the beginning. Marketing has changed quite a bit. Before you would do a billboard, or a magazine or newspaper ad. They are really expensive and they don't guarantee any results. An ad might say, "Best sushi in Sugar Land." But YOU wrote that. People would just flip through it. Magazines were big back then. "We deliver 200,000 magazines every single week." But how many people actually READ the magazine? About 90% are probably going straight to recycling, and the other 10% are looking for a plumber or a place to get their hair cut, and then they throw it away. We were spending thousands of dollars and getting nothing in return. Then Facebook came around, Instagram came around, Twitter came around. So we jumped on those bandwagons.

I don't remember when it first happened, but spirit nights started. A school will promote a place by picking a restaurant and tell their supporters, "Next Tuesday at Joe's Pizza, if you write 'Clements High School' on the ticket, they will donate 20% of that ticket to the school." That was genius! It gets the kids in here, we donate to them, and we don't have to spend any marketing dollars. We're only spending money on things that actually work. So we started doing that with churches, local schools, the Fort Bend Women's Center, and GiGi's Playhouse. We do spirit nights. You bring us people, we donate back. It's much easier than throwing money at marketing agencies and hoping for something in return. That money is not going to a good cause.

GOODSILL: You reach out to a lot of the non-profits and churches and schools for them to have a spirit night at one of your restaurants.

LITWINENKO: We don't need to reach out. They usually come to us. We would rather partner up than just donate \$100. If you bring me a lot of people, you make more money. It's beneficial for them and it creates a bonding relationship. "Why would I go to this place that has never donated to my school when I could go to this place that DOES donate to my school." Even if it is not a spirit night. You build goodwill. You can spend \$100,000 with a marketing agency and that money is not going to make Sugar Land any better. But if you were to do 100 spirit nights and help out all these schools, we are all growing together. And this money is going right here. It stays in our community.

We partnered up to get one of Sugar Land Police Dogs, a special vest, that was fun!

We did something for the Clements tennis team recently. We did something for the ROTC team there. We fight for the little guys. Everybody knows the football team. The ROTC guys and the tennis people don't get any funding so we help those people. GiGi's Playhouse is an autism center that helped people of all ages with Down syndrome. I've seen volunteers in a tiny space with 14 kids and they are loving them, having fun, dancing and singing. I want my money to go there. I don't want my money to go into some guy's expensive Bentley. I'd rather make sure they have glue and paper.

We're getting to the point where our guests have children who were babies and now they are working at our restaurants. Some started as a hostess and now they are doctors and are coming into the restaurant. So we're starting to see generations change. The kids are now our employees, our employees are now our guests!

At Japaneiro's, we noticed that when our guests would have a baby, they would disappear. Japaneiro's was more of a date place and babies are loud. So we thought that was a bummer. We also noticed that when the younger kids became of drinking age, we would lose them to bars and Flying Saucer beer places. So we thought we needed to give them options too. We can't have customers come in only at a certain age. From 30-45, you are our guest. Then you are not.

We opened Guru when craft cocktails and beers were very popular. The college crowd was getting big and we weren't getting that group at Japaneiro's. So burgers, crepes, craft beers and cocktails would bring them in. So we lost the people with young kids at Japaneiro's, they aren't old enough to go to Guru, so Jupiter is now where you bring your 2 to 12 year olds. When we opened Jupiter, we saw people we hadn't seen in years, with a six year old. "Oh, that's why you haven't been here! We haven't provided anything for you." You were still our guest but you just couldn't come. You see the kids grow up and start going to Japaneiro's. It's like we all feed each other as we grow. We definitely needed the kids. Kids decide where parents go a lot of the time. We didn't know that until we opened Jupiter. As parents, it is so much easier when the kid is happy, or when the kid is running around in the square. You don't have to worry because they aren't going to run off, and there is security there. And they have shows and all kinds of things.

GOODSILL: That's a nice fusion all within itself.

LITWINENKO: We have friends who say, "Oh, he slept so well that night!" So we babysit for free. The plaza is there for the kids to run around and it is acceptable. They are not a nuisance.

GOODSILL: Sounds like a win/win for the city of Sugar Land, too.

LITWINENKO: Yes, that too. Now they have a patio where they do a show, it looks nice right there, we have our customers who can go over there and get food. There's a place where they can come out and have a picnic. So accessibility is a lot easier for them. They don't have to go somewhere else or bring their own box. And there are beer, wine, water, or anything. They can use the restrooms. So it's worked out pretty well.

GOODSILL: Thanks for telling us your story, Victor!

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