

On Your Terms Episode 63:
Cooking, Overcoming Obstacles & Building an Empire
Guest Interview with Chef Mike Solomonov

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:00:10] Hey there, and welcome back to On Your Terms. I am beyond excited to share this episode with you today. If you've been listening to any of my episodes of On Your Terms, then you know that something I talk about a lot is really getting out of this little bubble that we're in, in the online coaching space, trying to bring in new ideas, fresh perspectives, really thinking outside the box. I mean, there's a reason that I called this show On Your Terms, right?

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:00:33] So, I think that this has been, like, a secret sauce for me in building this kind of business. I've seen it with other people. And I had this dream to bring you an episode that was really, really different from a really unique perspective of somebody who's outside of our space that you can apply. I mean, first of all, I just think he is the most interesting guy and he is super successful and an incredible chef. But I also think there's a lot you can take from what he shares and apply to your own business.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:01:02] So, I had this idea to have a little bit of a chef series here on the podcast, and interview a couple of my favorite chefs. I didn't know if anybody would say yes. And I, especially, didn't know if Mike would say yes, but he did, and I am so grateful. I am so excited if you get to listen to this interview.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:01:20] I had Mike on to talk to you about what success looks like for him, how he bounces so many different roles being a business owner, how he took care of his employees during and after the pandemic, how he deals with

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negative comments, and even how he bounces out with all the accolades in his success and not letting that go to his head.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:01:43] And, of course, we talked about what do you cook at home, and what are some of your favorite things, and all that kind of stuff. We really try to hit it all in the time that we had. I'm so excited for you to listen to this.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:01:53] Okay. I don't want to hold this back from you any longer. I am so excited to introduce to you Mike Solomonov. He's a beloved champion of Israel's extraordinarily diverse culinary landscape, and the chef wildly recognized for bringing Israeli cuisine to diners across the United States and around the world.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:02:12] He's the Co-owner of CookNSolo Restaurants with hospitality entrepreneur, Steve Cook. And together, they own Philadelphia's Zahav, the trailblazing restaurant where Solomonov is a chef, as well as Federal Donuts, Dizengoff, Abe Fisher, Goldie's, K'Far, Merkaz, Laser Wolf, and Lilah.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:02:29] Solomonov is co-author of three cookbooks and the recipient of five James Beard Awards - yeah. You heard that right, five - including 2016 Book of the Year for Zahav: A World of Israeli Cooking, 2017 Outstanding Chef, and 2019 Outstanding Restaurant for Zahav. Oh, my goodness. Outside of the restaurants, you can often find Mike with Steve at Pho 75 working at the kinks in their Israeli village.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:02:57] I am so excited to bring this incredible interview. Thanks to Mike Solomonov for coming on and chatting with me. I hope you enjoy.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:03:08] Hey, Mike. Welcome to On Your Terms.

Mike Solomonov: [00:03:11] Hey, thanks for having me, Sam. It's good to be here.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:03:14] It is so good to have you. This is like a dream for me to do, so I'm just so excited to talk with you today. And I just wanted to, like, ask you off the bat, you do so much. I watch everything that you share, at least, that you do. And I know you're still in the kitchen all the time because every time I'm at Zahav, you're there. And you're a business owner now of many different restaurants in different states now too. How do you balance all these different roles that you have these days?

Mike Solomonov: [00:03:42] Well, I think that, like, I'm definitely in the kitchen less that I have ever been. That much said, we've got the most incredible staff, like, at Zahav specifically. The time I spend in restaurants with the exception of meetings, is either Zahav or Laser Wolf Brooklyn. Laser Wolf Philly, Andrew, it's kind of his baby, whatever. So, I'm at Zahav, like, three nights a week or four nights a week. And I'm in Brooklyn, like, one or two nights, you know, generally one night a week.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:04:16] And then, I don't know, I'm in a bunch of meeting or - I don't know - I don't even know what I do, but I do a lot of that. And I do a lot of travel, corporate events or collabs, and sort of business development stuff, which sounds boring and can be pretty boring. So, I don't know, I mean, I think that the easy answer is that we have a really proficient, hard working team.

Mike Solomonov: [00:04:48] And I would say that this version of Zahav is probably the best one that we've ever had. We continue to get better and better, and I'm really proud of our team. We've got an amazing chef cuisine, Beau Friedman, and he's awesome. He was a line cook in Zahav many years ago and came back to Philly, and he's now sort of running it and doing a great job. And we've got just an incredible management team and support staff and all that, so it makes it much easier.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:05:21] Yeah. A good team helps so much. And Zahav is the best restaurant ever. I tell everybody this, I have gone to all this Michelin Star, the best this, the best that. And I'm like, "Everywhere we go, Zahav is better. Zahav is better. Everything." It's just incredible. And I know so many people write to me all the time and say they went and tried it because I talked about it, and so I hope more and more people will go after this.

Mike Solomonov: [00:05:42] Thank you so much.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:05:43] If you can get in, guys. You got to do it early.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:05:43] Thank you for the kind words, I appreciate it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:05:49] Always. So, Zahav was actually the first restaurant that I went to after COVID. And I also like to personally thank you because my dad was sick, my dad had cancer. I was taking care of him. I was taking him to Penn everyday so I was around all this other cancer patients, and so I was like bubbling myself off to make sure I was keeping people as safe as possible.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:06:09] And I remember hearing that you had the yurts at Zahav was where I got to go. And then, that you actually took really care of your staff. Our waitress told us I remember that night what you had done for your staff, not only during the pandemic, but then helping them stay afloat, and then helping them all to get vaccinated to be able to come back to work, and even helping their family. So, I'm just so grateful for what you've done and just setting such a good example. But I was wondering how the pandemic changed you as a business owner and what you've learned from it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:06:46] God, you know, I sort of feel like I try to answer that question everyday. The pandemic, actually it's interesting, in a way it sort of forced us to stop and rethink kind of everything. I would say that our business, our company, our team is probably better than it was prior. It's very hard to stop in the middle of a very busy restaurant or a very busy service or a very busy year, and say we're going to, like, start over again or we want to change our pay structure, we want to only open five days a week.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:07:28] These are not reasonable things you say in the middle of sort of busy chaos, because you don't really have time to stop. And because you're, quite frankly, scared. You can't just, like, pull the rug out from anybody. And, also, if you have told me five years ago that we would close for two days a week, I would have said no. That's the most irresponsible thing to do. We're full. We're totally full.

Mike Solomonov: [00:07:54] And, honestly, it's one of the best things that we've done. And it gave us the chance to totally change the way that people are paid, and the wages, and that's only benefited our team. And, actually - you've been to Zahav before and after - the format in the way that people eat and dine at Zahav, I think, is better than it ever has been.

Mike Solomonov: [00:08:23] But along with that came months or years of thinking that everything that we've worked for was going to go away, being scared, being demoralized too. I mean, psychologically, to have to explain to people what it is that we do, and the hospitality and sort of interacting and connecting with people to have an entire industry not be able to do what they care about and what they love and what they're good at.

Mike Solomonov: [00:08:59] In addition to incoming sort of uncertainty and all of that is really hard for the psyche. So, I feel like in ten years, there'll probably be some book that's written about what it is that we've gone through, and this is for every sector, this is for every individual. I will say that we are probably are better group.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:09:22] When we opened Zahav, it was right before the recession and it was immediately before my business partner, Steve, had to drive me to rehab for drug addiction.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:09:34] Yeah. You had a lot going on.

Mike Solomonov: [00:09:35] So, it's funny because that was - I mean, it's funny now many years later, to say like, "Wow. 2008 was the worst possible year that we could have opened a restaurant." And I'm like, "You know, 2020 was definitely [inaudible]." But I think that the industry in general seems to be bouncing back. I think that what the pandemic sort of exposed was the vulnerability of a lot of Americans. And I feel like that is something that you can't really put away after you've sort of seen it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:10:11] So, I don't know, it's going to take a couple years, I think, or a couple terms or a couple generations to really sort of build back the trust between everybody, but hopefully we'll get there sooner than later.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:10:23] Yeah. I think that's a lot to process over the last couple of years. I find myself saying that a lot of, like, I think that the last couple of years has shown us a lot in many different areas in life that I just can't put back in the cage in a post-2016 world and in a post-2020 world. I don't know, there's no going back.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:10:44] So, I was wondering, too, if you could share a little bit about where you currently draw

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inspiration from for everything, from dishes to thinking up new concepts, like Laser Wolf in Brooklyn or something.

Mike Solomonov: [00:10:59] So, I feel like there's no definitive answer. I know a lot of people have sort of formulas that they think they work creatively. I would say that my partner, Steve, and I, all we do is talk about food, we talk about people, we talk about experiences, we find locations that seem more cool, partners. So, it wasn't like one day I'm like, "You know, we need to open Laser Wolf in Philly or in Brooklyn." It was a culmination of a couple things.

Mike Solomonov: [00:11:32] I mean, Laser Wolf, the concept, was actually the catalyst for starting to cook Israeli food in the U.S., believe it or not. The restaurant that Zahav is, is not what we initially had in mind. And so, back in the day, if you wanted to be recognized as a chef or as a cool restaurant, there was a level of refinement that was the way that everybody did everything. Like, The French Laundry Cookbook and Michel Bras or Olivier, it's sort of the way that food was shaped or chefs were shaped in my generation.

Mike Solomonov: [00:12:12] So, you deconstruct it and use [inaudible] and transglutaminase and [inaudible] everything, and clarified this, and we all pleaded kind of the same way. I mean, when I was the line cook at Striped Bass, it was right after French Laundry came out, and I would say that most fancy restaurants in the U.S. had beurre monté to rest meat or lobster or whatever for their sauces. It was just the way that everybody sort of cooked.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:12:44] So, Steve hired me to be the chef of Marigold Kitchen after I left Vetri. And I was cooking, I would say, refined American or European food and I was using Israeli touches - I don't know - just because I think it's delicious and to make it my own. But I would never do something straight ahead, like a bowl of hummus or anything like that. That would never would have happened.

Mike Solomonov: [00:13:09] So, we were doing all the stuff and then I would go back home to visit my family. And we get off the airplane and go to a shipudiya, which is like what Laser Wolf is, like a kababi house or whatever. And you'd sit down and there'd be, like, 20 salads and laffa and hummus and grilled everything, and it was so fucking good.

Mike Solomonov: [00:13:32] You know, it was like anthropologically interesting as well culturally or gastronomically. It spoke to migration, diaspora, conflict, commonality, all the stuff. And it was vegan and vegetable heavy and then fresh bread and warm fresh laffa or pita dipped in hummus. It's as good as it gets, and then complemented the 20 different salads that speak to Jewish diaspora, indigenous Palestinian cooking, and sort of merging both of those things, and then also meat cooked over charcoal the most elemental way.

Mike Solomonov: [00:14:06] It was also like a big fuck you to [inaudible] cooking as well. And so, it was eating all the stuff and just sort of saying like, "Why aren't we doing this?" Like, this is what we want to eat, this is what's good.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:14:26] But at the time in 2008, I don't think we would have had the hutzpah to just be like, "We're going to do Laser Wolf," which is, essentially, it's like a meat in 20. It's like you pick your meat and then whatever. And I don't think people would have gotten it. And we certainly didn't have the confidence or the wherewithal to actually pull that off.

Mike Solomonov: [00:14:47] So, we opened Zahav, which is sort of maybe a bit more refined or maybe what people had in mind a little bit more about what fine dining was. We're not really fine dining, but people assume that we are, but we are pretty casual. And then, Steve and I found this space and we needed a commissary, a kitchen actually, for K'Far, for Goldie, and Dizengoff because we're just dealing with laminated dough, K'Far requires a ton of space. We're way busier than we thought we'd be. We have no idea how many fucking chickpeas we cook in a day.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:15:25] I can imagine.

Mike Solomonov: [00:15:25] And we have to do that in ten locations across the city is totally inefficient. So, we were like, "We need a commissary." We found the spot that looked good. But from a retail standpoint, it also looked great. I mean, it's in South Kensington. It's this beautiful building.

Mike Solomonov: [00:15:45] You know, there's a restaurant, actually, in Jerusalem called Morris that is like the most bare bones - was, I mean it moved actually. They got hit pretty hard during the pandemic. But it was a butcher shop at night. They would just put plastic tables and chairs in the middle of

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Machaneh Yehudah Market. And people would just come out and eat and they would grill meat. And then, it turned into, like, 100 plastic chairs sitting outside and it just turned into this big restaurant.

Mike Solomonov: [00:16:13] And we just thought it was the coolest place ever. So, that was kind of the reason that we did Laser Wolf. But it started way back before.

Mike Solomonov: [00:16:26] And then, with Laser Wolf Brooklyn, I met with Kevin Boehm, who was one of the principals of Boka Group. He and Rob Katz kind of are like Steve and Mike of Chicago, except they're very successful.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:16:42] [Inaudible].

Mike Solomonov: [00:16:43] They run great restaurants and they're just awesome partners. And they, along with one of the most sort of senior director, Dave Barzek, who's also incredible, approached us very casually right before the pandemic and said, "Hey, if you'd ever want to pair up, we have this hotel things and it would be really cool to do something together." And I'm like, "Yeah. Sure. Whatever." So many people said that to us before. Yes, it sounds great. I just assumed that they're way too cool for us and would never actually call me.

Mike Solomonov: [00:17:20] And then, during the pandemic, just as Steve and I, it was sort of in the morning, we're like sad, depressed, walking around in our bathrobes around South Philly just sort of one cuckoo's nest, like we're going to lose

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everything, everything sucks, how do we do this. And I, at that point, was like, "If somebody came to me and said I will take all the restaurants off the grounds," I would have been like, "Sure. I want to do this."

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:17:43] Really?

Mike Solomonov: [00:17:43] Yeah. Totally. Totally. And see if really - I don't know, I was like, "Let's just shut the doors and just see what happens." And see if we have to continue to be busy. We have to be active, otherwise it's going to impossible to ever restart.

Mike Solomonov: [00:18:02] So, we started doing this, like, little dinners and we would do takeout one night a week, and programming, and then eventually outdoor. And we build back sort of business, but in the middle of that - not in the middle, I mean sort of early on when things were totally fucked up, Kevin calls and says, "Hey, we're all super depressed. There's all this inactivity." And now we're entrepreneurs, too, so you can't avoid, not just like, "We want to make food and serve people," but we like the idea of creating.

Mike Solomonov: [00:18:33] And so, Kevin called and said, "Hey, we've got this deal with The Hoxton. We really think it would be cool if you want to do a Laser Wolf there." And we're like, "Sure. What do we have to fucking lose?" And then, things start opening up again, and we end up building this incredible second restaurant in New York. And we're going to be opening K'Far on the ground floor.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:18:54] Stop it. Really? Of The Hoxton?
That's awesome.

Mike Solomonov: [00:18:58] Exactly. And it's going to be pastries in the morning, and then lunch, and then dinner over there. And it's going to be amazing.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:19:06] I can't wait.

Mike Solomonov: [00:19:08] Yeah. So, it's been great. And it was something that really came out of the blue. We never said, "Let's go to Brooklyn and open our content." God knows we've had so many opportunities to open Zahav anywhere we want. And so, that's it. So, the creative bosses was just really sort of fundamental is really diving.

Mike Solomonov: [00:19:36] And Andrew, I credit a lot of sort of riffs on especially the salad team to Andrew Henshaw, who never up until recently wasn't really in Israel but is just a ways with local produce that we get and sort of his take on it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:19:53] And then, just the sort of bare bones really cool idea that I think really translates to what people want is elemental eating and cooking, and I think people just love it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:20:05] Yeah. It's so good. And if you guys are in New York, you have to go check out Laser Wolf, for sure. I'm so excited, like, K'Far is coming. I can't wait to get a drizzle and bagel. I'm already counting down those days so keep me posted.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:20:17] I wanted to ask you, too, because you mentioned about I'm sure you get pressured to open Zahav in other places. And I feel like whenever you do well, there's always this pressure - I mean, especially in America, I feel like - with this emphasis on capitalism and we always have to be doing more and more and more, and growing more and bigger and faster, and all that kind of stuff.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:20:37] So, I heard you said one time that making money sounds great but I like it when people come to Philly to have dinner, which made me so happy to hear you say. But, like, how do you balance that pressure? I'm sure you do have a lot of people on your [inaudible]. Like, you should put those somewhere else because it's doing so well here.

Mike Solomonov: [00:20:54] Yeah. I mean, pretty early on, we opened a Dizengoff in Chelsea Market. It was a very expensive sort of lesson in expansion. As well as opening a Dizengoff and Federal Donuts in Miami. So, I feel like we've been pretty selective and conservative about how we grow, especially out of state and out of market. We will be doing more things probably out of market. I mean, there's no question.

Mike Solomonov: [00:21:23] But I just think that we have an infrastructure and we have a company with a strong culture and years of sort of building that, I think, has helped us out. And finding the right partners, too. I mean, we wouldn't be doing Laser Wolf Brooklyn without a Boka Group and without Hoxton, and without the incredible team that we have there. There's just no question.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:21:51] Maybe that's the sort of template for how we grow out of state or out of market, I don't really know. But we could have opened a Zahav in Vegas ten years ago. It probably would have done well, I don't really know. I think that we would have been miserable. And I feel like I still relish like, when people come out of state to eat at Zahav, or out of country, or out of city, and they come to Philly and they have the weekend here - this is a big thing in the summer actually a lot of restaurants in Philly, I think. The zip codes or the area codes, rather, of the people that are eating there are all New York or D.C. or even LA. And you have people coming to Philly for, like, a weekend, and they've got two or three meals and they want to go to the barns or whatever run up the rocky steps or do whatever or see a show.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:22:47] Eat a cheese stick.

Mike Solomonov: [00:22:49] Eat a cheese stick. And we're part of that, and it makes me really happy and really, really proud because I do think Philly is an incredible city. And we're underdogs and it makes me proud to have people come from this first tier cities to our humble fair city of Philly.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:23:14] Yeah. I love it. I think it's so much part of our ethos. I remember when I run into the guys from Queer Eye in the city, and I was like, "You guys have to go to Zahav." And they're all like, "Yeah. We have. We've already been there five times." But I thought I was giving them a secret, but they knew.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:23:14] Thank you for sharing that. Thank you. Thank you anyways. Yeah.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:23:33] Yeah. I tried. I tried but they didn't need me. I was wondering if you would tell everybody about the first time you had a T.V. appearance, I hear that it involved a mandoline and didn't go so well.

Mike Solomonov: [00:23:46] So, it wasn't my first time. We were doing live T.V. and it was for, like, Fox Morning or whatever in Philly. And I was giving a pass over thing or something. I like to be very, very busy. I like to use my hands a lot when I'm doing [inaudible] everybody sort of busy and occupied. The worst thing that you want is a sterile chef on a morning show, especially when you start with three minutes, but then, usually, ten seconds you're free to go on. They're like, "All right. Only two."

Mike Solomonov: [00:24:24] And so, as the segment was opening, I was like mandolining celery and shaved off my fucking thumb immediately. And I'm a righty, and I was like poof. So, without anybody seeing, I just wrapped my hand with a towel and kind of went through everything. And directed Mike Jerrick to make something while blood was pouring out of my fucking thumb. And it went great. I wish I could find it. It was so funny.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:24:57] They probably have it in the archives.

Mike Solomonov: [00:25:00] I want them to find it. It really, really fucking hurt. But I was like, "This is T.V." Now, I mean

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I feel like T.V., particularly live T.V., is so close or T.V. production in general is just like restaurants, it's just sort of chaotic. So, it's all impulsive. Every move is like - I don't know, it's hard to describe.

Mike Solomonov: [00:25:24] But it's got the same sort of energy and I feel like I thrive in chaotic restaurants and chaotic services, and I feel like it works well with T.V., because everything is happening really fast and everything is changing. And it's really about the way you react to sort of imperfect circumstances that decides whether you're good or bad.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:25:46] Yeah. I can't imagine. I can't imagine trying to demo something into the three minutes. That seems like a recipe for a lost [inaudible], for sure. Speaking of T.V., have you watched The Bear?

Mike Solomonov: [00:25:58] You know, I have watched The Bear.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:25:59] Did you like it?

Mike Solomonov: [00:26:00] So, my wife is like, "We got to watch it." And I was coming home from work and putting that on is the least fucking relaxing thing ever.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:26:12] It brings it back.

Mike Solomonov: [00:26:13] I watch horror movies a lot. Like, I really like horror movies. And I do in a way find them soothing. But I was like, "I can't. This is not good for me. I can't do this before bed."

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:26:25] Does that mean that it's realistic?

Mike Solomonov: [00:26:28] I think that it is, yeah. I mean, it's still T.V., but definitely the most realistic depiction of kitchens and restaurants on television by far. There's nothing that's been really closer than that. Which I think is so funny because I feel like people are obsessed with restaurants and chefs and all that. And I'm like, "Why wouldn't somebody just do a good job depicting restaurant life?"

Mike Solomonov: [00:26:54] But, I mean, The Bear is good and it hits on a lot of things. But things, like, aggression, mental health, addiction, all that stuff is just something that we've been dealing with forever. That's what restaurants are in a way. So, it's unclear as to why nobody has really done a great job of depicting that.

Mike Solomonov: [00:27:17] You know, I was watching a movie on the plane, and it was a British film that was about a chef in a restaurant just kind of losing it. And I think I fell asleep or the plane landed, I didn't get to finish it. But I kind of find it enabling. It was pretty good. And I think it was sort of a character sketch and somebody just melting down a little bit. And the restaurant was, maybe, the backdrop but it was really [inaudible].

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:27:51] Have you ever felt lost about where to begin with the legal side of protecting your online business? Some people say you can just wing it at the beginning

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and get officially set up later. Not a good idea, by the way. Whether you're afraid to even start working with clients because you don't want to do something wrong legally and then get in trouble or your business is growing and you sort of forgot to take care of the legal pieces, I've got you.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:28:13] I don't want you to live in fear of the internet police coming after you and your business. But you do have to do certain things and get certain things in place in order to legally and safely run your business online. As much as it just feels like an unregulated Wild Wild West online, that is very much not the case.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:28:30] As an attorney turned entrepreneur and former corporate litigator, I can assure you that there are rules. There are real steps that everybody who runs or starts an online business needs to take. And you're not behind at all. We can get you set up and following the rules right away. In fact, we can even do it today.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:28:46] I want to teach you the five very simple steps to take to legally protect and grow your online business. You don't need an MBA to be a successful entrepreneur and stay out of legal hot water. But you do need to dot your legal i's and cross your t's in a few key areas that can't be skipped. That's exactly what I'll teach you in my free one hour legal workshop called Five Steps to Legally Protect and Grow Your Online Business. Just head to mylegalworkshop.com, drop in your email address, pick the time, and I'll send you a link to watch the workshop video whenever you have time.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:29:16] This is the best place to begin if you're just getting started legally legitimizing your business, so head on over to mylegalworkshop.com and sign up to watch Five Steps to Legally Protect and Grow Your Online Business now.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:29:30] Do other chefs come to you because they've heard about your experience with addiction and maybe they're struggling with it or have gone through it? Do you find like people are coming to you about that?

Mike Solomonov: [00:29:30] Yes.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:29:43] Yeah. Because you're so open about it, I assume.

Mike Solomonov: [00:29:45] I am. I am open about it. And I think people run out of ideas. And they're sort of tittering. They're like in the bottom of the bathtub, circling around rock bottom. The last thing that we're going to do as humans is ask other people for help or admit vulnerability or weakness. And when you're dealing with something like either addiction or alcoholism, or whatever, any addiction, this idea that you could somehow overcome it and be stronger or beat it is just fucking crazy, because you'll lose. You'll lose every scale of time.

Mike Solomonov: [00:30:34] So, I think that, for me, I belong to an anonymous whole step program, so it's a little bit like me being open is like almost breaking anonymity for myself and the choice that I make. But I think it's part of my program and it's something that's worked. And I feel like it's something that I

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owe to the industry that I love so much and the people who are in it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:30:57] Yeah. I'm sure you've helped so many people. Like, how did you get the courage at the time? So, if anyone doesn't know about this part of Mike's story, like when you were opening Zahav, that's when you were kind of hitting that part of rock bottom and that's also when you chose to ask for help, too, right?

Mike Solomonov: [00:31:14] You're right. Exactly. So, I was at the end. I have been using crack for about five years pretty regularly. And then, after Zahav opened, I started using a ton of heroin. And then, I was keeping it a secret from Steve, my business partner, and my ex-wife, we were married at the time. And it just was at the end. Like, things just wasn't working. I couldn't lie anymore. The excuses weren't working. I felt like I just sort of wanted to die. And it was just sort of the end of it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:31:53] And then, Steve and my wife at the time, Mary, and another one of our chefs, Erin, had an intervention for me. And it's not that I went kicking and screaming. I was actually pretty relieved at the time. The idea of honesty was just so fucking foreign to me. It was such a hard thing to do. And it was also, like, I was so humiliated and there's so much shame. And all these things that would trigger me, there was no way to deal with any of these stuff.

Mike Solomonov: [00:32:31] So, I went to rehab and I was happy to go to rehab, but it's humiliating. And you have to seat and

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look at these people that trusted you, that had so much at stake with you, that love you, that you've just fucking disappointed over and over again. And they're the ones that you have to rely on or ask for help. It's really fucked up.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:32:57] Yeah. It's so difficult.

Mike Solomonov: [00:33:00] It was very difficult. So, you know, it was obviously really a difficult year coming after that. I mean, we were dealing with opening this restaurant while it was fucking tanked as well. And I continued to take recovery very seriously.

Mike Solomonov: [00:33:16] But the first year is a lot of action, because, for me at least, you're trying to get from, like, one block to another without getting high or without calling a drug dealer, without stealing, whatever it is. And it's just, you have all these lonesome memory that you're trying to break. And fucking everything is a trigger. Like, everything just takes you back to that avenue, which is so unhealthy and damaging.

Mike Solomonov: [00:33:47] So, it was a ton of meetings, a ton of [inaudible] meetings, I mean, almost everyday for six months. Out patient rehab which was two hours a day or four days a week, personal therapy, exercise, and then also working running this restaurant that was fucking tanking and bringing that back to life. So, it really was not an easy first year but I'm really grateful for it.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:34:24] Yeah. I mean, and starting a restaurant at any time is so difficult, so I can't imagine. Kudos to you for going through all that. That is so hard. It wasn't a GQ article that, like, broke the Zahav curse in the beginning?

Mike Solomonov: [00:34:40] I think it was a Philly Mag article, because we had gotten a bunch of sort of national press. And then, a combination of, like, Restaurant Week, which helps us actually format our menu which nobody understood. It sort of made us fit into a box, which actually really worked. And then, it was Philly Mag giving us, like, number one restaurant. I think that got everybody back in. Yeah, that was it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:35:14] I mean, after that, obviously, ups and downs every single day. Everyday that we were open, we treat as a new sort of start. And we have to exceed expectations for 250 strangers. It's not an easy thing but we do it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:35:31] Yeah. Exactly. It's so much. I know since then, you and the restaurants have won a crazy amount of awards. And you've won the biggest awards that you can win with what you do. And I've heard you say before that you try not to completely absorb all that and let your head get too big. But how do you balance that when you know you're really freaking good at what you do?

Mike Solomonov: [00:35:56] I don't know. I mean, I have imposter syndrome, and I just firmly believe that you either get better or get worse. And we're just driven by that. We want to exceed expectations. We're in our 14th or 15th year of being open. And

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for restaurants, that's a very, very long time, and we want to continue to be our best versions of ourselves. So, we put a lot of pressure, I think, on becoming better all the time. And I just feel like that's it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:36:34] It's not that I'm not very proud or very grateful or acknowledge how important all these awards are. I think, for me, for our team, for Israel, for my family, all that stuff I take very seriously and I'm very proud of it. But I also tend to not focus on the positive things for too long.

Mike Solomonov: [00:37:00] And I think if we start believing things that are written about you, it can be kind of damaging. So, the awards are wonderful. Tonight, we open at 5:00 p.m. If we fuck things up with one table, those words don't really mean shit.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:37:19] Yeah. It all comes back to that. That's really what matters at the end of the day. It's funny, you said about you can't take what people write about you to seriously. I feel like that goes both ways because I'm assuming somewhere along the way, you've gotten some hate, too, or something. You have been dissatisfied.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:37:37] I, for one - because my business is so online focused - I get a lot of mean comments, nasty comments, I get a lot of anti-Semitic comments on my Facebook Ads. That's super fun. I get anti-Semitic emails.

Mike Solomonov: [00:37:50] I'm only laughing because if I had a quarter for anybody that said some fucking crazy shit to me on

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Instagram or whatever, it's almost hard to explain to people that haven't gone through it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:38:05] Yeah. That's why I was going to ask you - I was hoping I'm not alone in this. Not that I want you to get any hate - how do you navigate this? Does that affect you?

Mike Solomonov: [00:38:14] You know, it is what it is. I think there is a very small percentage of people in the world that are dicks and that are anti-Semitic or anti-scientist, or whatever the fuck it is that they have a problem with me. I'm not going to let a couple nuts affect my mood, affect my mission, any of those things.

Mike Solomonov: [00:38:43] But, also, I'm on Instagram, that's my only social media account. It's great. I think it's fun. I enjoy it. But it's not my life. So, I'm such a tech hermit, so it's not in my face every single day.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:39:08] That's healthy, I feel.

Mike Solomonov: [00:39:11] But I also feel like it's a fucked up sort of measure of success. It's like the more sort of successful you are, the more haters there are. And I hate to even drop into that, but it's proudly, Sam, just like a sign of you being successful in what you do. In some sense, it makes people mad.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:39:33] Yeah. Apparently. And apparently I have a nose, which is something else I've learned from comments.

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But you're like, "Oh, wow. Until you told me that, I had no idea. This is groundbreaking news."

Mike Solomonov: [00:39:48] I know. I have a nose too.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:39:51] Yeah. I'm glad we're in that together.

Mike Solomonov: [00:39:55] You have a beautiful nose, Sam.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:39:54] Thank you, Mike. I think you do too.

Mike Solomonov: [00:39:57] Thank you.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:39:57] It's so ridiculous. Oh, my god. People. But, yeah, I'm glad you say that. I think it's helpful because I just always think of it in the balance of not letting all the winning stuff make you too cocky. But then, also, if I'm going to do that, I can't let the bad stuff drag me down too much. I'm just trying not to let this stuff bother me either way. I kind of try to keep it balanced.

Mike Solomonov: [00:40:16] I just think that - oh, god - there's some great poem that my friend gave me, and it was basically like, "Wow. You didn't piss anybody off. What a fucking boring life you live." And I'm not out there trying to upset people or, obviously, not devices like that. I have principles and I stand by them, and it pisses a lot of people off, and that's fine.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:40:42] But, like, things are just more open. It's much easier just to write something sort of crass or reader hateful. It takes ten seconds, you can do it on Instagram, and hit send. It's very different than before where you have to write a letter or you just let it manifest around your dinner table and you can express yourself. I don't know, in general, it doesn't really affect my life.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:41:14] Yeah. I'm very glad to hear that. One of the reasons why I started the podcast and why I call it On Your Terms, besides the legal play, is because I really want people to do things their own way. I really pride myself on kind of following a unique path, and my dad was such a big proponent of saying "Be a leader, not a follower." He was just drilling that into me since I was a kid. And so, I was curious what success looks like to you. Like, what's your definition of success?

Mike Solomonov: [00:41:47] I'm not really sure. I mean, I feel like along the journey, I sort of ate a lot of checks. I don't know what that is. I mean, I think being able to take my kids to Israel for two weeks and rent cars and stay in close hotels and shit are things that - I do have very hard working parents that gave me everything that we sort of needed - but to be able to take some vacation - I know that sounds cheesy - but that is a big one.

Mike Solomonov: [00:42:26] I wanted to advocate and make a name for Israeli cuisine sort of first in the states and then also internationally, and to be able to be recognized for that is a big level of success, I think.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:42:48] I had a friend that's actually sort of with my brother in the IDF, and he messaged me privately and said, "Following my career and a lot of the things that we've done has me think differently about how things ends." Because his interaction was sort of from a military standpoint before, and so I think that is a really big win or huge humanizing people. So, I think that's a big one.

Mike Solomonov: [00:43:32] And watching people get clean and sober, I mean, me being able, albeit hopefully, October 28th, I'll be celebrating 14 years of sobriety. I mean, that's amazing success.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:43:44] Congratulations.

Mike Solomonov: [00:43:44] Yeah. So, a lot of indicators of success in my life, and I don't take any of it for granted.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:43:51] That's really cool. I love those. Thank you for sharing that with us. I have a lot of fun-ish questions for you. So, a lot of people wanted to know about what you cook in your free time. So, people said, if you had a long day and you go home - which I think you always have a long day - and you make dinner, what do you make typically?

Mike Solomonov: [00:44:11] I would say, like, four out of five times, it's peanut butter and jelly sandwiches or peanut butter and honey. I'm a big peanut butter and honey person. I would say, I cook a lot of vegetables in my house. And I'm trying to eat a ton of La Goose, which I know is boring and sort of what

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everybody expects. But I will take chicken broth and chickpeas and Harissa, and frozen spinach, and sort of bring it to a boil with olive oil.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:44:49] That sounds amazing.

Mike Solomonov: [00:44:50] And then, parmesan cheese. I don't know, that kind of stuff. Or I make a massive salad. That's a big thing my wife and I do. It's like two forks, one bowl. I just make a huge, huge sort of chunky salad and just park it on the couch with two forks and watch [inaudible] movie that I'll force her to watch with me. It's fucking terrible.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:45:19] It's just good sport.

Mike Solomonov: [00:45:19] Yeah. Yeah. She sacrifices a lot, I think, to be with me. So, that's what I do.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:45:29] What's in the salad situation? I need to know about that.

Mike Solomonov: [00:45:34] So, in the salad situation, I would say, generally, are a ton of greens that I will mince, cucumbers, tomatoes, depending on the season, sometimes a grated carrot. Honestly, it's whatever shit I have laying around my house. But I like to mince everything and then I will sort of, like, salt it, especially kale. I'll pre-salt the greens and I'll massage it a little bit just to kind of relax it, like it breaks down better.

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Mike Solomonov: [00:46:04] And then, I got a fucking NutriBullet. We got it as a wedding registry thing, a NutriBullet, which I totally make fun of. And now, I'm like, "It's the best thing ever." Do you have one?

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:46:18] I have a Vitamix, but I also have an immersion blender that has the attachment, like one of those brown ones. So, it's essentially the same thing.

Mike Solomonov: [00:46:26] It is, essentially. And I, obviously, have a Vitamix too, and I have a fancy home Robot Coupe, and I have an immersion blender. I am telling you, the NutriBullet - fuck it. I hope you get sponsorship because it's good. Have the good people of NutriBullet send you one of these - Sam, they're fucking amazing. It sits on the counter. I make smoothies every single day, especially with my kids. I pump flax seed or whatever into these veggie smoothies. But, also, you can make vinaigrette. Most of my vinaigrette are [inaudible] so easily, so easily.

Mike Solomonov: [00:47:02] So, that's what I'll do. And then - I don't know - probably grate some cheese on top of the salad and that's it. But I've always got - like right now - a big block of pecorino cheese that's almost over age. It's super dry. But I think that that just works. I almost under season the salad and I just load it up with salty cheese.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:47:25] That sounds so good. I am obsessed with salad. I could eat it multiple times a day. But I've been making what I've been calling a pizza salad, which is like things you would put on a pizza and a big salad everyday. And it

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just has an insane amount of oregano, and I chop everything up like a ton, and I use tons of [inaudible] stuff, and it's really, really good.

Mike Solomonov: [00:47:44] Is it dry, regular, or fresh?

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:47:46] Dry. I do the dry. But I do have fresh growing outside, so I probably should do that, huh?

Mike Solomonov: [00:47:51] I don't know. Actually, I feel like with things like salads, there's something to be said for fresh oregano or fresh [inaudible] and, of course, mint. However, the flavor is totally different. And dried mint in salads is fucking unbelievable.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:48:04] I do put that. I'll put it on red onions and put some olive oil and lemon juice and then let it marinate while making the rest of the salad. And I feel like that comes out really good.

Mike Solomonov: [00:48:12] Totally. Totally.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:48:13] I like doing that.

Mike Solomonov: [00:48:13] That's also a good vinegar. That's a good acid for the salad, pickled lemons, you know.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:48:18] Yeah. It's so good. With the fresh oregano, I always sauté chickpeas and olive oil, and I put fresh oregano, and Za'atar. And then, once it's done, I let it cool

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off a little bit and I put some Feta in it. And I eat that for dinner sometimes. That's really good.

Mike Solomonov: [00:48:34] I love it. I love it.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:48:36] Yeah. That is really, really good. So, somebody asked when you'll open a restaurant in D.C. I don't expect you to commit to this but they want to know.

Mike Solomonov: [00:48:46] I'm not sure. I'm not sure. D.C. is an-hour-and-a-half train ride from Philly.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:48:51] This is true. Get on the train, people. It's easy. It's easy. We were living in D.C. actually - we we were still living in Philly - we were temporarily down there since my husband, Ryan, was working in congress at the time. And I was taking the train back to Philly, like, every three days. So, you guys can come up for dinner.

Mike Solomonov: [00:49:11] Totally.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:49:12] Yeah. You guys are fine. Someone asked - Loren asked - if you had to start over in your career, would you do anything differently?

Mike Solomonov: [00:49:24] It's hard to say. I mean, I feel like I'm really pleased with the way that things worked out. I'm not sure. I'm not sure. I almost went to Europe and chef for restaurants in Sebastian. And I think that experience would have been really fun and cool, but I don't believe that there's one

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thing that would have made my thing better. And I don't have that kind of formal education, whatsoever.

Mike Solomonov: [00:49:57] My partner, Steve, has had a ton and he is also truly brilliant. He's a really good teacher. So, I feel like a lot of this sort of business-y stuff, I really enjoyed learning from him. I'm not sure I'm interested and fascinated by organizational behavior and psychology. I don't think that would have made me a better manager or anything like that. And I never graduated from college. So, I would love to actually go back and study that, but only just because I like it. Addiction stuff I think would be really interesting too.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:50:37] Yeah. Yeah. For sure. What was your favorite week night family meal growing up?

Mike Solomonov: [00:50:47] Lamb chops on the grill with rice [inaudible]. That was my favorite.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:50:54] That sounds delicious. Is that what your mom would make?

Mike Solomonov: [00:50:58] Yeah. My mom and dad would do that. I mean this German Shepherd named Izzy would go fucking nuts for the bones, you know.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:51:06] That's awesome. Did your dad cook too?

Mike Solomonov: [00:51:06] Yeah. He's a great cook.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:51:10] That's awesome. That's really cool. A lot of people wanted to know what your favorite Philly hidden gem or restaurant that you're willing to tell people about is.

Mike Solomonov: [00:51:22] Favorite hidden gem Philly restaurant, I think it's called Cafe Soho in Cheltenham. It's probably the best Korean wings, like, maybe ever. They're really good.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:51:35] That's awesome.

Mike Solomonov: [00:51:37] I would say that that is excellent. What else? I mean, I don't know. I eat kind of everywhere. Spice C in Chinatown is great in terms of noodles. It's so good.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:51:37] Do you have, like, a go-to place in Philly? What's the place that you go most often that you don't own?

Mike Solomonov: [00:51:58] Yeah. I don't really eat a lot in my restaurants. But I would say that, I go to Pho 75 the most. I think that is delicious. And Spice C, I go to. And where else? I eat recently Las Cazuelas, but I don't know if that's a hidden gem but it's an incredible restaurant. Royal Izakaya is just so fucking good, it's so, so good. Where else? Where else? Why am I having such a hard time thinking about this? Kanella is fucking great.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:52:44] Do you ever go to Cafe La Maude?

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Mike Solomonov: [00:52:48] No, I haven't. But I want to go there so much. I know [inaudible] amazing. I love his family. I heard it's freaking fantastic.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:52:55] It's so good. Yeah, the Green Shakshuka. Oh, man. It's so good.

Mike Solomonov: [00:52:59] Yeah. I know. I'm sort of a hermit. On days that I'm not working, I sort of take a leave going out. I know that sound whack.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:53:10] No. No. I get it.

Mike Solomonov: [00:53:12] I enjoy cooking at the house. I don't know, I'm obsessed with food. Obviously, I eat. I can also have a block of cheese and a little bread from [inaudible] bread on my counter, and I could just eat that throughout the day. Like, that and some grapes would be as good as it gets for me.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:53:39] Yeah. That sounds awesome. It doesn't have to be fancy or complicated. Good food is good food.

Mike Solomonov: [00:53:45] Totally. Totally.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:53:46] That's awesome. Well, thank you so much, Mike, for doing this. I just so appreciate you taking the time.

Mike Solomonov: [00:53:51] Oh, my god. Sam, thank you so much. And I hope that I answered all your questions. And continued success.

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Sam Vander Wielen: [00:53:59] Thank you so much.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:54:05] Thanks so much for listening to the On Your Terms podcast. Make sure to follow on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or wherever you like to listen to podcasts. You can also check out all of our podcast episodes, show notes, links, and more at samvanderwielen.com/podcast.

Sam Vander Wielen: [00:54:19] You can learn more about legally protecting your business and take my free legal workshop, Five Steps to Legally Protect and Grow Your Online Business, at samvanderwielen.com. And to stay connected and follow along, follow me on Instagram, @samvanderwielen, and send me a DM to say hi.