

S H A N A

ALEXANDER

L A W Y E R S

M O N E Y

D R U G S

M A F I A

THE

PIZZA

CONNECTION

The Pizza Connection by Shana Alexander

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... GOOD-NATURED JOSEPH BENFANTE, thirty-seven, was born in Brooklyn, of Sicilian parents, and grew up in Bensonhurst, a heavily Sicilian-Italian neighborhood. A boyhood friend is fellow Pizza lawyer Gerry Di Chiara. Benfante graduated from New York Law School in 1973 and went directly into private practice. [...]

Benfante has an uncanny ability to get his clients acquitted of drug and murder charges in New York State criminal courts. As a result, he has one of the largest criminal-law practices in the city, and worked many organized-crime cases for Pizza. Only weeks before the Pizza Connection trial began, he won an acquittal for two New York Transit Authority workers caught in their hotel room with a kilo of cocaine.

[...] “You should see him in the spit and sawdust of the state courts! Joe's up there with the best.”

[...] Benfante treated himself to his red two-seater convertible after he won an acquittal for the district president of the Jew Jersey Teamsters, who was accused of robbing the union dental fund. Benfante loves to joke with the jury, and his most irate objection is often tinged with a last-minute smile toward the jury box. He was a college wrestler, and he moves and dresses like James Caan's portrait of Sonny in the movie *The Godfather*. He speaks fondly of the old mobsters who were legend in his boyhood neighborhood, men like Meyer Lansky, who controlled Cuba, and seventy-year-old Carmine Lombardosi, who once worked with Lansky and now drives a Rolls-Royce but still gets into bar brawls, after which his wife patches up his wounds.

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[...] Speaking slowly and pacing thoughtfully, he begins by thanking Judge Leval “for being gracious enough not to leap on me from the bench.” Then he thanks each of his brother attorneys by name. [...]

[...] His entire summation will follow the same pattern: Find a way to make the bad stuff you're stuck with operate in your favor.

After a long, soft, flattering opening, his voice hardens. “This is a trial of your 200-year-old legal system. Shouldn't we be able to remember individual witnesses? Be able to remember individual testimony? This is a trial that test due process!”

Then he mocks it. “If I were Rudy Giuliani, I'd hire three experts in paleontology and archaeology, tell 'em to go to the darkest Africa, show me where the first Mafioso was born. I'd tell the jury – you're gonna be here five years! The Darwinian theory of the Mafia. The first code words . . .”

The jury is already smiling fondly when he says, “If this is the longest criminal trial in federal history, I gotta get credit for being the most destroyed lawyer that ever was!” Bigger smiles from the jury. Modest dimpling from Benfante.

“I’ve been on the Pizza case three years! My daughter’s only five! . . . I’ve probably been overruled more times than Ronsisvalle.” Leval does not laugh, nor Mazzurco; but the rest of the room is loving this.

[...] “What did I do wrong? I could be a mummy from all the Band-Aids I took in this case! . . . But they let Benny Zito get away. With \$625,000! He’s probably on some beach, with chorus girls. Ganci’s dead. And I’m here, stuck with this case!” Uproarious laughter.

“Mr. Tomasso Buscetta tells you Gaetano Badalamenti had nothing to do with drugs. So what are we all doing here?” Stronger laughter. Benfante has said all the things the other lawyers wanted to say, but didn’t dare. A brave lawyer with nothing to lose, like Benfante, gains a paradoxical advantage: total credibility.

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The judge announces in his most solemn voice, “There is a note from the jury . . . It reads as follows: ‘We the jury have reached a verdict.’” The room is utterly silent. A little tinkle of an offstage bell is heard, and the eleven jurors and three alternates are escorted in. They do not look at the defendants.

[...] The foreman’s throat is drying up. The clerk gives him a glass of water. He turns to Counts 2-II on the verdict form, the dread 848 charges, with their mandatory sentence of ten years to life. Seven men are charged. Five are guilty: Badalamenti, Catalano, Joe Lamberti, Castronovo, and Alfano. Sal Lamberti is not guilty, and neither is Sal Mazzurco. Benfante’s face splits into a jack-o’-lantern smile. Schechter means. Their clients, like all the other defendants, remain poker-faced.

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[...] Benfante’s star has been on the rise since the Pizza case. In the fall of 1987 he won an acquittal in a murder case in which the killing was witnessed by a passing taxi driver, the accused killer was caught with the murder weapon a half block from the body.