

**Josh Wamsley: 0:04**

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**Brian Sheehan: 0:50**

Welcome to Retail Intel, the podcast dedicated to shining a spotlight on the most innovative and rapidly growing brands in the retail sector. I'm your host, Brian Sheehan, and I'm thrilled to guide you through the dynamic world of commercial real estate, where we explore the latest trends, groundbreaking concepts and the stories behind today's most successful retail businesses. On this episode, I'm excited to have Josh Wamsley, founder of Mazunte, with us. Josh has an inspiring story of entrepreneurship and innovation in the restaurant industry. Mazunte is known for its authentic Mexican cuisine and vibrant dining experience, bringing a taste of Mexico to the Midwest. I'm eager to learn more about his journey and the story behind Mazunte. So I'd love to start with your background. Can you tell us more about your career journey and what led you to start Mazunte?

**Josh Wamsley: 1:42**

Yeah. So I was studying journalism at USF, St Pete so the one on the water and I essentially was living on the beach in Sunset Beach and I knew that once I graduated I have to do something, otherwise I wouldn't leave the beach. So I decided to move to Europe and I studied to get my TEFL, which is teaching English as a foreign language. I did that for about it's about a four week class course, did that and then I traveled around Europe and then I moved to Korea. For two years I was teaching in Korea, getting ready to move to Taiwan, when I decided that I wanted to open a Mexican taqueria or a little taco shop, because there were none in Cincinnati. So I moved to Oaxaca, Mexico, because I had gone to this restaurant in Seattle, Carte de Oaxaca, and I had visited my sister out there. We went to the restaurant and I knew the moment I ate that food. It was, um, it was, uh, enchiladas with mole. I was like I've never, ever, had had Mexican food of this quality, of this caliber, of this flavor profile. So Oaxaca is the place I want to go teach English and learn. So I moved to the small town in the middle of Oaxaca. I had access to the mountains, I had access to the city. I had access to the coast, which is obviously I named it Mazunte, and I would spend the weekends either at the beach at

Mazunte, traveling around Mexico or cooking with various people throughout the town and discovering the markets.

**Josh Wamsley:** 3:26

I came back to Cincinnati in 2011 and my business partner and I his name's John. I told him before I left this is what I want to do. I'm going to travel in Mexico, I'm going to learn all the food. I'm going to come back and we'll build this restaurant. My dad can essentially craft it. He's incredibly talented, creative. I'll be the contractor, we'll raise money and we'll build this little taco shop. And John was always on board, and so we've still been business partners ever since, and we opened in 2013.

**Brian Sheehan:** 4:00

That's incredible. So your experience all over the world led you to this place in Mexico. You had some experience with the cuisine before that, but you went down there essentially learned how to cook, had a vision to build open a restaurant, yeah, and what was the connection with Cincinnati?

**Josh Wamsley:** 4:24

Again, I grew up in Cincinnati, yeah, okay. So I grew up in Cincinnati, I had left for college and so I was coming back to visit my family, and when I came back, I tried to go to this taco shop. And it was, they were just shitty tacos. And I was like I can do better, and I not in an arrogant way, just an honest, you know, more of a thoughtful way. And that was the first time in my life where this vision was unfolding in my mind. As I was in the middle of the night, I'd wake up and I was just this. It was unfolding, I could see it and I, I told my parents, I, we were walking down the street one time, kind of, and I was making a decision would I go to Taiwan or Vietnam? And I was going back and forth and I just like, I think I'm going to move to Mexico, and it was 2010. And I that's what I did.

**Brian Sheehan:** 5:11

I'm curious how did you explain it to your partners and how do you explain the brand to people who are unfamiliar with it even today?

**Josh Wamsley:** 5:21

Yeah, that's a good question. I don't think of Mazunte as a brand. Uh, that, probably, yeah, maybe, maybe I should. It's, I'm not, I think, the greatest one in terms of like branding. Um, I explained Mazunte as a culture. It's a group of people. I understand that we, we have restaurants, we have markets, we have catering, we have wholesale, but we're not really like. I mean, we are a brand, but I don't think of it that way. Uh and so, but

it but it the way I would explain the **Mazunte**. It's a group of people who really, really care about quality, we care about humans and we try to. We try to represent Mexico and not be restricted by the history of Mexico, because if you're restricted, you become a prisoner to the word authentic. It's important to be an authentic person, but if you try to just be authentic to everything you do with food, it's limiting. So we want to be creatively inspired by Mexico, not restricted.

**Brian Sheehan:** 6:24

Well, that's a good point, and we talk a lot about authenticity on this podcast and I was thinking, you know, this concept of authentic Mexican cuisine still niche in a lot of communities. I mean, you could probably go to most small mid-sized markets in America and they wouldn't have the experience of, you know, ever dining in a place like **Mazunte**. So what were some of your biggest challenges? Opening the first location and then also expanding it to additional locations?

**Josh Wamsley:** 6:58

Yeah Well, the biggest challenge up in the first location is number one. I had no idea what I was doing as a restaurateur, as a contractor. So you have all of that. I mean I, we, we built it ourselves, I was the contractor, I was driving the city crazy. I would show up and ask him questions. I'm like God, dude, I mean it was, I was. So I mean, the good thing is is I am, I'm so curious and very persistent, which was, I mean, sort of like qualities you need if you're going to open your own business. But I would not, I wouldn't give up, which was great, but in hindsight it would have been so much better to have had a contractor, because it took so much of my energy to build the restaurant that by the time we opened it, I was already exhausted. So now I've built it, we've opened it, and now I need to learn how to run a restaurant and I need to relearn how to lead people, Because you can't manage people.

**Josh Wamsley:** 7:54

You can lead them, but you can't manage them. You can manage products, you can manage protocol, but you have to lead people. It's different if you walked and I said hey, brian, my name is Josh, listen to me, today I'm going to manage you. Or, hey, brian, my name is Josh, follow me. Today I'm going to lead you. Fundamentally different. So I had, and I hadn't led people for a while since I was, you know, a teacher. So to get back into that mindset was hard. After, after building **Mazunte** that was a pretty big challenge, um, finding the location was not that was. That was pretty. I, I, our Ken Arbino he's our broker, he's an amazing dude, best broker in Cincinnati by far, um, and he helped us find it. We found it, you know, pretty much on day, like the first day, um, and then we

negotiated the lease not fun, I'm sure, as you know, uh, but I learned a lot through that process as well.

**Brian Sheehan:** 8:49

What was it about? The location that stood out to you?

**Josh Wamsley:** 8:52

On this one, we had a location plan, which is probably in hindsight, not in hindsight. Making a location plan was the best thing I ever did, and the location plan I made in Cincinnati is. I wanted to be um, basically 20 minutes from um, from anywhere in the the tri-state area. So 20 minutes from mason, 20 minutes from the west side, 20 minutes from downtown, 20 minutes from the east side, everywhere, right, um, which is exactly why I put it uh, off of red bank. I wanted to be near a really busy intersection, red Bank and Madison.

**Josh Wamsley:** 9:26

I wanted to be in a kind of a random spot where it could be, you know, a novel discovery for people. And I wanted to be in the middle of five of the most affluent neighborhoods in Cincinnati. So we'd have, like, basically, five minutes from each neighborhood. So we'd have we'd definitely we'd always have people to be able to spend money, because, I mean, when I was designing it, it was 2011 and 12. And, dude, the economy was a little different back then and I was moving back from Mexico, aware of that, you know, and I mean, I was broke. I had 60 bucks in my bank account. I know how this is going.

**Brian Sheehan:** 10:01

So you weren't specifically looking for co-tenants per se, that you thought, oh, I need to be next to them or near this. It was really kind of what does the trade area look like? Yeah, yep, how do I fit right in the middle of that? Yeah.

**Josh Wamsley:** 10:17

And how and how quickly it is. I remember when I first met you I was like where do you live? You're like blue ash. I was like how long does it take you to get here? You're like seven, eight minutes.

**Brian Sheehan:** 10:28

What were some of the key elements that you focused on to bring the vision to life? I mean, it's a really so. The first location's really unique and for people that haven't been there and experienced it, maybe you could explain a little bit about it. But like, how do you translate your design vision into a physical restaurant?

**Josh Wamsley:** 10:51

So when I was, when I had the vision, I, when I was in Mexico, I would teach. I taught at a university and I would often just put on a movie for them, uh, like a wedding crashers or

something Right, so they would be watching the movie in class and then I would draw out, uh, the vision, um, and so I had. I basically just drew it out one time and I knew I wanted a really, really small space and it was an L shaped counter, uh, which was based on my favorite restaurant in the world, which is Kaka'i by the Sea in Tokyo, and it was just like a little the first part of that restaurant. There was an L-shaped counter where people were cooking behind. There were tables in front, so I based it on that and I also wanted you to order at the register and drop the food off, and so I designed that essential. So I took that drawing and I built everything off of that. I knew we were going to use what we had here because in Mexico I think it is pretty clear that there are certain areas of Mexico that are really, really poor. And Oaxaca at one point was the second poorest state in Mexico.

**Josh Wamsley:** 11:51

So the people there taught me to use what you have, whether that was tree stumps, recycled wood, recycled everything you take. You take what other people throw away and you and you use it. So we knew that that was our vision, to utilize whatever we could. I would go on craigslist free every day and dictate people's wood. So we did everything possible to repurpose materials, wood, anything we could, and that's what you see at Mazunte.

**Josh Wamsley:** 12:35

Obviously, I needed to make it feel like Oaxaca. So when you walk in, the first station you see is the salsa bar station with the comal and she's making tortillas. That was intentional, um, and I originally had drawn that in the back, but the when I was in high school I worked at Kenwood country club and my chef there his name was Jay and he, he helped me. When I came back I reached out to him and he said hey, I really think you should put that Camal station in the front. When people walk in they need to see it right away. Uh, he's a chef at Terrace Park Country Club now, but he really helped me. Like, make sure that that moved up. So, surrounding yourself with people and getting you know different ideas, you have your vision, but sometimes someone can say the simplest thing that tweaks your vision and it makes it even better.

**Brian Sheehan:** 13:26

It's so true and I come back to this kind of idea or notion about authenticity and the fact that you were learning what you were learning and seeing in Oaxaca, you were able to take that same call it a philosophy, I guess and you know, use that to help design the space. I mean, mean it really created a unique and interesting environment that yeah, it's a story.

**Josh Wamsley:** 13:53

Often, yeah, it's the story. That's what makes it authentic, because it's a real story. It's something I experienced and I was able to bring back into when you walk in, you know it's meaningful, you can feel it.

**Brian Sheehan:** 14:01

so you've been able to take a successful you know, grow a successful first location, expand that into additional locations. Can you talk about that process? How did you go about... you were very intentional about where and how you wanted to grow this business.

**Josh Wamsley:** 14:25

And in some ways, in some ways, yes, in some ways, no actually so at the beginning, we were going to just, um, do Mazunte, basically one Mazunte per city, essentially, and that would. And, uh, and my business partner I met in early 2016. Um, and, and I said, and he was like hey, you know, I, I don't, we're not really following the plan, and I'm like you're right, we're not really like this. So, but I, I'm not the guy to tell the same story again and again and again. So, if you want to, if you, if we want to bring other people in, absolutely We'd have to like, maybe give up some control. If there's a company that wants to come and rip these off, I'm okay with that, but I can't, I won't be the guy to lead that charge. My, I like to tell new stories and to do more unique. My, my, my goal right now, personally, is not to just to be a CEO of a company that is running the same kind of restaurant in different cities. I'm not saying that that can't happen from the same day that is running the same kind of restaurant in different cities. I'm not saying that that can't happen for Mazunte. I'm just not the guy for that, truly. So I want to grow organically, and we decided that that was the way we were going to grow and we opened.

**Josh Wamsley:** 15:36

But what happened was we opened the Mercado. We had to open Mercado because the health department came in. We were cooking outside, we had outgrown the space and she said, dude, you need, you need to move and get a new kitchen. So we went to that. We went down the street uh, victor is our landlord, is an amazing dude, he owns kismet, all these other places. Uh, and when we found this place, uh, we started renting it and we built a kitchen there. Then we took over the back, um, and we did more production. And then we then we made the Mercado in 2017. So so, once you got to 2017, you had Mazunte Taqueria and then you had Mazunte Mercado, producing all the catering. That was out of necessity.

**Josh Wamsley:** 16:18

I always had the vision for the Mercado, but I thought it was going to be right next to Mazunte. And then, and then we found the building downtown, because I knew I wanted

to tell a new story about, basically, Mexico City. I was traveling around there a lot, and I wanted to tell the story of Mexico City and maybe more of like the talkery is there and sort of like the urban style, and we found this building downtown. We purchased the building. We built Mazunte Central in 2019. And then we had it for six months and then the pandemic hit. And we had it for six months and then the pandemic hit and it was. We built it for a lunch, right, so that was. But it's perseverance. Okay, the world's not going to always just cater to what you know, to your needs or your desires, so you have to adapt.

**Josh Wamsley:** 17:03

We all went through that everybody. And then so as we were. But in the meantime, we were developing this pretty big wholesale strategy because Kroger we were in Kroger. They said, hey, will you guys go to new stores? Dorothy Lane came to us and all of a sudden, we're in 15 stores and we have this whole wholesale retail program portfolio. And then at that point, we people were reaching out to us. Obviously, you know they reach out to us a lot for different locations.

**Josh Wamsley:** 17:29

But in 2021, we had this opportunity this hotel, these guys were building this hotel in Lexington and they reached out to us. They said, hey, would you be interested in doing this project in Lexington, and so we really looked into that. It took us about five or six months to make that decision and we went. We went to Lexington a lot, um, very cool guys, really creative. Um, and we wanted, we liked it because it was it was in an up and coming area, which is where we want to put in the Mazunte, not really in the middle of everything. We want people to discover the Mazuntes, um, so we liked that part of it and we, we opened in 2024 Mazunte Bodega and Labrasa.

**Josh Wamsley:** 18:16

Labrasa is an event center in Lexington, um, and then Bodega is the Bodega, is the, the restaurant, and it's this. Bodega is actually. Bodega means wine cellar, in spanish. We think of it as the corner, the corner shops in New York, um, but we do, we're trying to, we're trying to like sort of like thread, that needle, I guess we offer wine, um, and we it's also full service. We've never done that on a zoo day. So it's totally different concept. Same food but different concept.

**Brian Sheehan:** 18:45

And I'm curious you know what the future looks like. What are your growth goals over the next five years? What's a concept that you haven't opened that you think would fit well into this? You know Josh's world of Mexican restaurant store retail experiences.

**Josh Wamsley:** 19:03



Right now the the for the next five years. I just want us to focus on what we have. So I want us to grow internally, um, I want to make sure that we, we, we learn really how to run a full-service restaurant in Lexington, um, and we develop the catering and the events there, because in Lexington we, I want to develop the full service because we have a bar. We've never had a bar before. I want to do that and I want to develop the catering program and the events. You can come into the front and you can also rent a bodega for special events, anything you want, um. And then I want to make sure that we do the same thing with Centro's breakfast.

**Josh Wamsley:** 19:43

I always wanted Centro, the downtown location, to be a breakfast spot, more of a cafe style, where you'd come in, you would get coffee, you would get conchas, you would get breakfast, tacos, tortas, anything you wanted. I wanted that to be the spot where you could have coffee in the morning, al pastor, lunch a margarita, and the afternoon. And that's what Centro's becoming, which I'm excited about. We have to continue to, to build our wholesale that's, that's obviously the easiest one for us to scale. People always ask Brian. They're like, hey, why don't you just reproduce Mazunte? reproduce Mazunte. And my answer is it's a lot easier to replicate guacamole than it is to replicate Mazunte. Uh, so we're going to continue to do that Um and um and just hone in on what we have. So I don't foresee any new ventures in the next five years. I'm not saying that won't happen, but, uh, that is not something that John and I or the team that are actively talking about.

**Brian Sheehan:** 20:41

How do you think about the different partnerships that you're going to form and and be it with you, you know Kroger, or with Karrikin, or you know Anybody else how do you think about those types of partnerships?

**Josh Wamsley:** 20:54

Alright, so with Kroger, basically Elias Leisring. Eli's called me one day and if you guys never met Elias, he's hilarious, he's like dude, come with me to Kroger, we'll open it together. Eli's and Mazunte next to each other and I was like, yeah, so I didn't think of it, I was just like he was my friend, it was fun, a little upfront cost. It allowed us to develop systems, to build, you know, to learn how to like kind of fall and get up and Kroger has been an incredible partner for us, they have been really helpful to help our brand grow Uh and and then with with Dorothy Lane, they're usually we just people come to us and we either say yes or no. Uh, and Dorothy Lane, Calvin kept coming in. He said, hey, I really think this need to be good in Dorothy Lane, I said awesome.

**Josh Wamsley:** 21:44



With Kerrigan, um, I was friends with Jeff, um and, uh, he was the owner and we had talked about, you know, doing a margarita. He said, hey, let's try to do a margarita here and we spent a lot of time developing that recipe. But as we developed that it was, they were using their own agave spirit. You can't call it tequila if you're making it here. And they had their own triple sec and we tried and we got it close sometimes, but there was never the consistency, um, and so we, what one of our biggest mistakes is?

**Josh Wamsley:** 22:15

When you have an idea, it is cool, it's a cool idea to can something, um, and then we're like we'll can it and then we'll use it as our in-house margaritas, but it wasn't the same, and so next time it's better just to keep your in-house margarita and then take the small steps. So if you want a can, that's cool, do that, but don't, don't stop making your in-house margarita until you know it's exactly the same quality, same consistency. So the customers were disappointed, obviously, and we went back to our normal margarita. Um, and then Karrikin is still open, but they don't serve our margarita anymore.

**Brian Sheehan:** 22:51

Okay, I guess thinking about you know innovation and that's a good example of one where you tried something different and you know, before you replace something that is working really well, that people come to the restaurant for you know really love, like, make sure you get that that new thing to where it equally replaces that I get that. I'm thinking about technology and other innovations in the space. Has there been anything kind of big that has really impacted your business that you might point to for somebody who wants to expand? That's got a vision for you know how am I going to grow my, my restaurant, my um my markets?

**Josh Wamsley:** 23:38

in terms of like technology specifically.

**Brian Sheehan:** 23:41

Yeah, has there been anything that you know you guys have rolled out could be a point of sales system or um, even you know you talked about how you you try to lead people, not just manage them.

**Josh Wamsley:** 23:53

Yeah, well, I mean, it's still a couple. Uh, we switched to Toast, which everyone uses Toast, Toast is Toast, is compatible with a lot of various things. That helped. That helped us in terms of reporting, uh, but we use restaurant 365. Uh, will, he was he 365. Will, he worked in Mazunte. He was our intern and then he became our first ever

controller Amazing dude, still one of my great friends. He helped us with Restaurant 365. And we use that now. Julie, she runs the accounting and finance. That is a really, really good software. I recommend that specifically. It'll help you, it'll help everybody as they continue. It has so many programs on there that you can work with in terms of scheduling. Just you name it, it's got it. So, R365, major, major software.

**Brian Sheehan:** 24:45

Maybe the last question for you here is what advice would you give to someone that's looking to start a business in the restaurant industry?

**Josh Wamsley:** 24:53

All right, okay, I want to give really genuine advice, no bullshit. So it's when I meet with people and they ask me that question, I always tell them if you're going to start, you know, do you have a family? And if you're going to do this, the first year or two, if you're really starting a restaurant, you're not going to see much of your family. So be aware of that. Like you won't, you really won't see them to like that much. And and maybe I'm going about that from a negative visualization standpoint but I think it's better to go that way, because if, if, in fact, you can see your family and you do have the time, that's great. But if you go into it with that mindset, they need to accept that.

**Josh Wamsley:** 25:39

Because if you are starting a business and you don't tell your loved ones that like the toll it's going to take, and you don't tell yourself that you're not going to be prepared when the weight hits you, you're going to be drained every day by scenarios, by people, by sales or by lack of sales, and you have to stay the course. So you need to. That's number one. And then you always have to tell yourself that, remind yourself that dreams are really exciting to chase, but exhausting to maintain. So once you achieve that success, trying to maintain it is really exhausting. So just when you have this idea that you hit the top coaches go through this all the time. They win a championship and then they're like man, I'm still not as satisfied and that is something that you have to sort of come to terms with.

**Josh Wamsley:** 26:32

There's a lot of awareness and acceptance that comes with it, but knowing the toll it's going to take on you and I remember in the beginning of Mazunte, everyone would say hey, let's go out, let's come to a party, and I was like I can't, I can't, I can't. It was. You're not even efficient, you're just kind of running around because you're learning how to do so many different things. There'll be a time, after you've owned it for a while and you have a really good team in place, where you'll learn about efficiencies and you'll learn

how to be effective. And I'm certainly projecting, but my experience is it takes some time.

**Brian Sheehan:** 27:08

Absolutely Well, Josh. I really appreciate you for taking the time to come on the podcast and thank you for joining me on Retail Intel. Be sure to check out Mazunte in person and on Instagram at Mazunte Cincinnati.

**Josh Wamsley:** 27:23

Okay, thanks, buddy, good talking to you.

**Brian Sheehan:** 27:27

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