

TIME

Growth in Small Batches

Cucina Fresca Gourmet Foods puts taste before efficiency.

By SARAH MAX | October 16, 2012

It's this time of year that Cucina Fresca Gourmet Foods owner and executive chef Brad Glaberson gives his 40-person staff a tongue-in-cheek mandate: "No one takes vacation, gets sick or dies," he says.

With the holidays approaching, school in full swing and New Year's no-carb resolutions yet to be made, demand for the Seattle-based company's handcrafted gnocchi, smoked tomato sauce, and gruyere mac and cheese reaches a boiling point October through December.

Every week, orders pour in from more than a thousand grocery stores, specialty shops and food service companies in nearly 40 states. And every week Glaberson, 42, and his team make and ship small batches of a couple dozen different products in a matter of days – hand-picking bushels of basil, mixing hundreds of pounds of dough for pasta and going through so much milk Glaberson says he should just buy his own cow.

Production would be more streamlined and less stressful if the company made bigger batches and stockpiled several months of product at a time, says Glaberson. But he isn't willing to save time or cut costs at the expense of taste. As such, Cucina Fresca is a perfect example of a common small-business problem: How to grow a company without undermining the very qualities that made it successful in the first place. The problem is especially acute when you are talking about a company whose very identity is based on doing things with meticulous care and attention to detail. "I always say we're inefficiently delicious," he says.

Cucina Fresca was founded in 1980 by husband and wife, Sue and Mike Tenore, who sold their fresh pasta to local restaurants and in Seattle's Pike Place Market. After stints at Canyon Ranch Spa in Arizona and as a private chef, Glaberson went to work for the Tenore's in 2003. "We were in a tiny location with one ravioli machine, and we delivered everything ourselves," says Glaberson, a graduate of the Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, New York. "There was so much potential there."

When his employers decided to sell in 2006, Glaberson was first in line. With a small business loan and a vision to make Cucina Fresca a household name, he began ramping up slowly. What little budget he had for marketing he spent on in-store tastings. "I always felt strongly that if I could get our products on a spoon and into your mouth, it would sell itself."

In many ways, it has. Since Glaberson took over, revenues have more than doubled – and with retail going from just 1% of sales to more than 63%. He's expanded the product line and moved facilities twice.

Yet, Glaberson says he's committed to using fresh ingredients and cooking in small batches. That's not to say he hasn't found ways to streamline the process. Rather than pour sauce into each container, as he and his crew did for many years, Glaberson upgraded to a piston filler. He also invested in labeling equipment. "I refuse to use canola oil but I enjoy packaging faster," he says. "What used to take eight hours to label sauces, now we do it in less than 40 minutes."

Relative to dry pasta and bottled sauces, Cucina Fresca is on the pricey side. A 10-ounce package of tortellini starts at \$4.99 and 20 ounces of mac and cheese retail for \$9.99. Yet, Glaberson says his customers run the gamut from serious foodies to budget-conscious parents, even students, who see fresh pasta an alternative to dining out. "During the recession we got emails from people saying times are tough but this is their treat," he says, noting that sales increased more than 15% from 2008 to 2009.

The company's success hasn't gone unnoticed. Glaberson says he fields calls from would-be investors or buyers at least once a month, but he's not interested. "At the end of the day the product is exactly the way I want it," he says. And he plans to keep it that way.