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Once-busy pizzelle bakery awaiting a comeback

By Diane Mastrull

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Stan Kourakos was lured into the pizzelle factory at the edge of Norristown one day in 2003, enticed not by the aromas of anise and vanilla that floated from the squat brick building, but by the prospect of new business.

Kourakos was a salesman for a packaging distributor, and he hoped to persuade the owner of Little Pepi's to buy all the boxes needed for those crispy, wafflelike cookies from the company he represented.

As it turned out, it was Kourakos who wound up buying - Little Pepi's, that is.

Six years and a move to Hatfield Township later, the cookie company is getting the best opportunity of its 45-year-history to go big-time.

Just last Tuesday, TV celebrity chef Rachael Ray featured Little Pepi's pizzelles as the "snack of the day." It was a rebroadcast of an October episode of Ray's show, watched by 1.5 million to two million households daily, according to the Nielsen Co.

And this week, for the first time, Little Pepi's pizzelles - packaged in distinctive tall boxes featuring a plump mustachioed baker on the front - are headed for Kmart shelves.

Unfortunately, the new exposure comes amid the worst economic upheaval since the Great Depression - one that has taken a major bite out of household budgets, especially for discretionary items such as sweets.

"Our product isn't a staple, it's a luxury - a feel-good item," Kourakos said last week as lines of golden wafers passed by on a conveyor belt, headed to a half-dozen employees, who bagged and boxed them.

Now a thing of the past is the "double-digit" sales growth Little Pepi's enjoyed during the first four years of Kourakos' ownership (he would not provide specific dollar amounts). This year, total sales are off 15 percent over last year, with orders from one big retail customer down 40 percent, he said.

To adjust, baking days have been reduced from five, to four, then three days a week since last December. The company also shut down completely for a total of eight weeks this year, during which its 11 employees - who make about \$8.50 to \$12 a hour - were not paid.

Grateful that such worries are no longer his is Little Pepi's former owner, Philip "Chick" Schettone.

The pizzelle business started in the kitchen of Schettone's East Norriton home in 1964, when his wife, Marylou, said she wanted to get a job to help supplement income from the family's food market.

"Make some cookies for us, and we'll sell them in the store," he told her.

The pizzelles, made from a recipe of Marylou Schettone's grandmother, were such a hit that the couple moved production to their basement, where they baked for entire weekends. They would load cookies into the family station wagon and deliver them to distributors in Philadelphia every Tuesday.

The enterprise would move again - to the floor above Chick Schettone's parents' market at the corner of DeKalb and Lafayette Streets in Norristown. And then again, in 1978, to a former restaurant on Lafayette Street, opposite the family market. It was there that Kourakos met with Chick Schettone early in 2003 to pitch some boxes.

At the time, Chick Schettone had more pressing matters on his mind.

SEPTA was moving to acquire his property for a parking garage. The idea of finding another location for the business, setting it up, and running it held no appeal to a man of 74, who had tired of getting up at 2 a.m. every day to bake.

"I decided it wasn't worth it for me at my age to continue on," Chick Schettone said in an interview last week.

According to Montgomery County land records, in July 2003, Chick Schettone was paid \$318,500 for the 1.5-acre site, now home to a five-story garage at the Norristown Transportation Center.

That same month, Kourakos bought the pizzelle business for a price neither would disclose.

"I'm glad I sold it to Stan," Chick Schettone said. "He took it to the next level. He made it grow - came in with different equipment and added distributors."

Kourakos also brought with him about half the employees who worked at Norristown, most of whom lived in town or close by. The others did not want to make the 16-mile commute to Hatfield or did not have transportation to do so, he said.

Among the new equipment is a gas-fired oven with 87 plates. It can make 250 to 300 cookies a minute, about three times as many as the electric ovens Chick Schettone used in Norristown. Bake time for each pizzelle: 31 seconds.

Kourakos also developed a Web site for Little Pepi's (www.littlepepis.com), where pizzelles are offered for purchase in six flavors - lemon, almond, chocolate, coconut, vanilla, and anise, the most popular by far. Six 7-ounce boxes go for \$28.95.

Kourakos cites Canadian company Nustef Foods Ltd. as his biggest competitor - not counting Italian grandmothers, of course. He said he had altered the recipe only slightly from the original to boost flavor and eliminate the use of sunflower oil.

He also has introduced a small amount of lecithin to the batter to prevent the cookies from sticking to the baking plates, a greater problem with the new gas-fired oven.

The changes do not bother Conshohocken's Beverly Coshin, a Little Pepi's devotee for a decade. She has 12 packs of anise-flavored pizzelles shipped to her every three weeks directly from the factory.

Coshin, 64, a homemaker, said she ate most of the 50-calorie cookies herself: "That's my only vice.

"I don't drink. I don't smoke. I just love these pizzelles."

She is Kourakos' dream customer. The challenge now, said the 54-year-old father of two, who once had plans to retire by 55, "is to go find more business."


"Sales cure all ills."

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Inquirer television critic Jonathan Storm contributed to this article.

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