

Entrepreneurial plan cooked up at Monmouth University works

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WHAT'S NEXT?

Area in-store demonstrations and taste tests of new gourmet pasta sauces from Nanina's In The Park continue Sunday at ShopRite, 2433 Route 34, Wall, and May 26 at ShopRite, 2200 Route 66, Neptune.

All demonstrations run from 11:30 a.m. until 3:30 p.m.

A lucky coincidence set in motion a plan that has brought a new high-end pasta sauce to local supermarkets and created a job for one Monmouth University graduate, with the potential for more.

In 2005, John Buzza, a business professor at Monmouth University, was teaching a class on entrepreneurship at the West Long Branch school. He also had a second job: general manager at the Nanina's In The Park catering and banquet facility in Belleville.

For more than 50 years, Nanina's pasta sauces have been renowned. Similar renown has surrounded the culinary capabilities of head chef Vincenzo Loreti, a native of Campania, Italy, who has been dicing tomatoes for Nanina's for more than 35 years.

Buzza needed a class project in which students could create and run a business. Nanina's had, for years, wanted to produce its sauces for the retail market.

The light bulb went off and a partnership was made.

Bringing the idea to market was not an easy task for the students, then operating under the name University Promotions. They tried many production companies and recipes before they came upon Del Grosso Foods, Tipton, Pa., which now produces the sauces for mass distribution. Before Del Grosso, companies didn't take the students seriously.

"We'd tell them we're from the university, that we're looking to get into this project. They wanted no part of it," said Nick Massari, 23, a Monmouth University graduate who was Buzza's project leader.

Buzza's students, however, didn't waiver despite their initial rejections. They researched the market and knew the low-end pasta sauce market was too crowded. Further, Nanina's already had an established reputation for elegance and class, said Massari, which is why they opted for the gourmet segment.

"For the whole semester, about 35 students were out on the road, looking at our competition, researching manufacturing companies, bottling companies, working with artists on the label, writing up stories, doing Web design, marketing," said Nanina's part-owner Joe Maurillo. "The final results

are so tremendous. We are getting rave reviews."

After the 2005 semester ended, Nanina's internal management team continued the project and added sauces. The sauces began appearing on shelves four months ago, about four months after the company hired Massari full time as head of operations.

This month, Massari, of Toms River, has been teaming up with current students to conduct in-store demonstrations throughout Monmouth County.

"They experience what it takes to bring a product to market and to take pride in educating consumers," said Massari of his decision to use college students for in-store demonstrations.

Massari, who majored in business administration with concentrations in management and marketing, said he's already been asked back to Buzza's class to share his experiences.

Maurillo said that while the semester was too short for the students to have seen their project through from concept to shelf, they definitely helped speed the process.

"We spent another year bringing Nick on and getting it to market," Maurillo said. "It was pretty cumbersome. The main gist of the whole relationship with Monmouth was it got the process started, and we were able to get a marinara sauce that was able to go to market."

Now, patrons of local ShopRites, as well as Kings supermarkets in northern New Jersey, are beginning to see Nanina's In The Park gourmet sauces on their shelves. Soon, customers of Pathmark will be similarly treated. Whole Foods has just signed on as a distributor.

Nanina's is planning to expand — gourmet pasta, olive oil, roasted peppers and vegetables, balsamic vinegar and cookies — packed in gift baskets.

Other sauce recipes are being readied for market: a spicy Fra Diavolo, a tomato basil selection and a boscaiola, mushroom and olive sauce in a marinara base.

The all-natural, preservative-free product aims to compete with the likes of other high-end sauces, such as Rao's and Patsy's. "Now it is just a matter of getting it out to the public and making them see that as well," Massari said.

Massari, whose Italian heritage made him a natural fit for the company, said the sauce is as good as his mother's, which is not the kind of news a mother likes to hear.

"At first, when I told her (that), she wanted to smack me in the face," Massari said. "Now she keeps one case at home."

Profit is a few years away, said Maurillo, a part-time resident of Curtis Point in Brick.

"We're spending a lot of money," Maurillo said. "We're investing everything right back into the company. It is going to take some time, but we're in it for the long haul."

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