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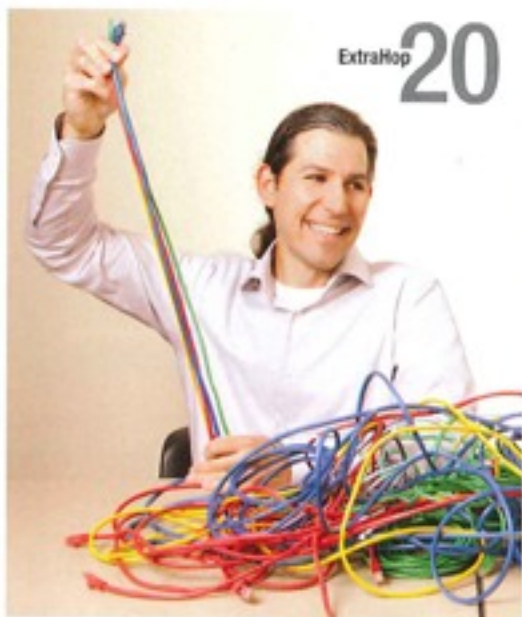
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SCOTT F. CAMPBELL OF LANE POWELL PC

Cucina Fresca owner Bradley Glaberson on the pasta line.



Fresh Approach

CUCINA FRESCA'S PREPARATION OF CONVENIENCE FOOD IS ANYTHING BUT CONVENIENT. BY KAITLIN GROVES

ABOUT 40 PEOPLE IN HAIRNETS and long white coats are making tiny batches of gourmet pasta at Cucina Fresca's plant just east of Boeing Field. One pours a 50-pound bag of flour into a large mixing bowl. Another adds three gallons of eggs. A machine kneads it into dough. It is flattened, squared and stuffed with a blend of imported Parmesan, Pecorino

Romano and ricotta cheeses. The same process is repeated by teams throughout the factory time and again.

To a kitchen chef, this exercise may seem to be taking place on a large scale. But from a mass-preparation standpoint, it's almost minuscule, and certainly a lot of work to produce thousands of ravioli squares. Why not mix it all at once?

Bradley Glaberson, Cucina Fresca's owner, listens from his office in a corner of the factory to make sure machines are "pinging right." He says manufacturing in large quantities wouldn't produce the same quality. "Every single day, [the food] needs to be perfect," he explains. Each piece of ravioli has to look and taste homemade, because that's how Glaberson's client restaurants will advertise it on their menus. Perhaps even more to the point, as Glaberson notes on his firm's website: "My daughter and her friends

eat Cucina Fresca all the time. For that reason alone, it has to be all natural."

Glaberson describes his factory as "inefficiently delicious," compared with large-scale producers that will mix 500 to 600 pounds of dough at a time. "We're not just 'push a button, flour drops in, push a button, eggs drop in,'" he says. "It is an art form." Cucina Fresca also goes to great lengths to use "natural ingredients readily found in home kitchens" to create the homemade taste restaurants tout.

"With a product like pasta, that's pretty unique," says Jeff Reinke, editorial director of *Food Manufacturing* magazine, of Cucina Fresca's small-batch approach and emphasis on quality. "You see more of that with bakery items, beer and wine."

It's possible Glaberson adopted the practice when he was an operations manager at Cougar Mountain Baking Company. Or when he was in charge of recipe development and culinary operations at Seattle's gourmet take-out pioneer, Pasta & Co. Wherever he got it, he got it, and he insists Cucina Fresca will never make food differently.

"Benji here is an artisan," he says, pointing to a Cucina Fresca employee standing next to a machine flattening noodle dough. Benji adds eggs from a pitcher whenever the dough looks dry. "We don't do anything here except what I'd do at home," says Glaberson.

Glaberson's products may be "home-made" in small quantities, but that policy hasn't stopped Cucina Fresca's sales from growing by 62 percent in the past five years. The company now sells 30 retail and 130 seasonal food service items—from four different gourmet mac-and-cheese products to seven varieties of filled pastas to eight styles of fresh sauce—in more than 1,000 retail outlets in the United States and in Canada. It plans to

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GLABERSON'S PRODUCTS MAY BE "HOMEMADE" IN SMALL QUANTITIES, BUT THAT POLICY HASN'T STOPPED CUCINA FRESCA'S SALES FROM GROWING BY 62 PERCENT IN THE PAST FIVE YEARS.

branch into other food groups, including natural soups and rubs for meat and seafood. And Glaberson says he plans to stick with his "inefficiently delicious" strategy going forward—even sacrificing shelf life for better tasting food.

Cucina Fresca's competent team makes it happen, Glaberson says. He has tried to surround himself with people who have strengths different from his own. He knows their competencies, he says, because he has done every job at the company. His food and business philosophies, such as "product over

profit," have also helped, he says. "All the business decisions I make are led by my being a chef."

How does Cucina Fresca's business model work during a recession?


Credit the shrinking middle class and the widening gap between those looking for the lowest price and those willing to pay higher prices for high-quality products.

"A wide swath of American companies is convinced that the consumer market is bifurcating into high and low ends and eroding in the middle," *The Wall Street Journal* reported last year.

The most current reports from the Gini index, a widely accepted measure of income disproportionality, show there has been a 20 percent rise in income disparity



during the past 40 years, according to the United States Census Bureau. Consumer-oriented companies like Procter & Gamble and PepsiCo's Frito Lay have noticed and have reacted accordingly. "We're going to do this both by tiering our portfolio up in terms of value as well as tiering our portfolio down," P&G CEO Robert McDonald told *The Wall Street Journal* in 2009.

Knowledgeable, discriminating "foodies" are at the heart of Cucina Fresca's success. "Seattle is an awesome food town," says Glaberson, who says foodies simply appreciate Cucina Fresca's "real food from real food products." 



Fresh pasta made in small batches is at the core of Cucina Fresca's business model.