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In depressed economy, consumers go for comfort of mac'n'cheese

The owner of Cucina Fresca, a pasta and sauce company south of Georgetown, pays his 30-some employees more than minimum wage, plus paid vacations and holidays, and he is keenly aware of how unusual it is to be growing and hiring in this economy.



A couple years ago, Brad Glaberson had trouble hiring a delivery-truck driver for less than \$15 an hour. Now, he said, "I literally have people coming and saying, 'I'll work for you for minimum wage.'" "The owner of Cucina

By [Melissa Allison](#) and [Amy Martinez](#)
Seattle Times business reporters

Fresca, a pasta and sauce company south of Georgetown, pays his 30-some employees more than minimum wage, plus paid vacations and holidays, and he is keenly aware of how unusual it is to be growing and hiring in this economy. Cucina Fresca has nearly tripled its work force since Glaberson bought it in 2006, and annual sales are up 35 percent over the past two years to more than \$3 million. Despite an economy rife with layoffs and demolished retirement accounts, Cucina Fresca hasn't seen a decline in the number of consumers willing to pay \$9 to \$10 for 20 ounces of frozen macaroni and cheese. The mac-and-cheese line, introduced last year, is more than a nicely packaged children's meal. For one thing, Cucina Fresca's "macaroni" is actually penne pasta, and it comes in three fancy cheese flavors: Gorgonzola, creamy fontina and smoked Gruyère. A sharp white cheddar version is in the works. The smoked Gruyère is already one of the company's best sellers, rivaling its fresh tomato vodka sauce. "We use super high-end, expensive ingredients," Glaberson said. Still, even he is amazed that some online customers "pay \$55 for overnight shipping of \$30 worth of mac and cheese." The mac-and-cheese is Cucina Fresca's only frozen product, but Glaberson is working hard on a line of frozen lasagnas. "Everyday I think of something I want to do and start working on it and bringing it to market. There's no red tape," he said. Since buying the company from Jay Beattie three years ago, Glaberson has expanded from five products to 30. He also expanded its customer base from restaurants and a handful of grocery stores in Seattle to more than 150 stores in seven states. Locally, Cucina Fresca pastas and sauces are sold at Metropolitan Market, Whole Foods, Thriftway, Town & Country Markets and QFC. Trained at the prestigious Culinary Institute of America in Hyde Park, N.Y., Glaberson has been a chef at the Canyon Ranch resort in Tucson and a private chef. He came to work for Cucina Fresca about six years ago, and when Beattie decided to sell it, Glaberson "mortgaged every single thing I had and bought the company." He's ahead of schedule in paying off the debt and does not want investors. "I don't want to ever get a phone call from someone who's telling me how to run my company," Glaberson said. "I can't sit in stupid meetings with stupid people saying stupid things."



— **Melissa Allison**

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