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Carving a Path

Rocky Mountain Pies celebrates 20 years

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“At this point, we have plenty of capacity and look forward to growing our business to a point where we need another pie line.”

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On the cover: Lemon meringue pies work their way down the line at Rocky Mountain Pies. Cover by Brian Twede Photography

following their vision

As the bakery marks 20 years, leaders continue their quest to provide top-quality pies and service

by Michelle Smith

For a would-be ski bum who chose restaurants then pies as a career instead, leave it up to Rocky Mountain Pies President Mark "Par" Grandinetti to sum up his business philosophy with a skiing analogy: If you can't see, you can't ski. As a member of the US freestyle ski team in his youth, he explains that skiers want a sunny day when competing on the slopes so when they make those 80-foot jumps, they know where they're going to land. But skiers still must compete in harsh weather conditions.

That's true in business as well. Since starting Rocky Mountain Pies in Salt Lake City 20 years ago, Grandinetti and his partners have faced the turbulent headwinds that all bakers have had to navigate: recession, pandemic, supply chain slowdowns, and skyrocketing ingredient and transportation costs. Through the storms, successful businesses can survive and even thrive, but owners have to see their situation clearly and react quickly. That is, if they want to continue competing.

"When we meet here in our conference room, we talk about the events: 'Are we going to be able to see clearly? Is the order defined properly? Does production see it? Do they acknowledge it?' Everybody has to see so they can react and do it correctly," he said. "I use that little skiing analogy, but it really applies to every aspect of our business all the way to giving your employees the tools to do the job right."

The business, which serves in-store bakeries and a variety of foodservice customers, prides itself on making customers' lives easier by providing top-quality service and points of differentiation that make their pies stand out, including homestyle accents like hand-peaked meringue and hand-laid lattice toppings.

"When we founded Rocky Mountain Pies, we knew we wanted to create our own path by making products that will set us, and especially our customers, apart," Grandinetti explained. "Doing that meant slowing our lines down a bit and adding the homestyle look that will stop a shopping cart."

To keep up with demand, the bakery, which produces $50 million worth of pies annually, recently replaced one of its lines to add capacity, increase quality and reduce downtime.

"We are always looking for ways to improve our throughput, quality and reduce labor," Grandinetti said. "At this point, we have plenty of capacity and look forward to growing our business to a point where we need another pie line."



The bakery's caramel drizzler and egg wash machine recirculate toppings, eliminating waste in both areas.

Photography by Brian Twede Photography

Trials and successes

After Grandinetti helped open 16 locations for Marie Callender's Restaurants & Bakery early in his career,



he got the idea to start selling pies out of the back room of their restaurants to grocery stores. The pie equipment in the restaurants was underutilized, so he saw an opportunity.

"We delivered to club stores, to all the major chains and the little locals and built a great following. It was probably the easiest thing we've ever done," he said. "It was so fun to walk into the grocery store, fill our custom pie rack and come back the next day to an empty rack and fill it again."

Leaders at Rocky Mountain Pies include (from left) Danielle Jones, accounting; Dave Park, vice president of procurement; Kenzie Fowles, inventory and logistics manager; Kris Burt, chief financial officer; Mark "Par" Grandinetti, president; Ryan Capener, food safety and quality assurance director; Doyle Converse, vice president of manufacturing; and Craig Kirmer, continuous improvement director.

He and his partners then moved on to found Western Country Pies, operating the business from 1989 to 1997 before selling it. After working with the new owners, Grandinetti left and started Rocky Mountain Pies in 2006 in the building where Western Country Pies began. His partners, who also worked for Western Country, include Kris Burt, chief financial officer; Doyle Converse, vice president of manufacturing; and David Park, vice president of procurement. Other key team members include Eric Carcellero, director of human resources; Ryan Capener, director of quality assurance and food safety; Craig Kirmer, director of continuous improvement; Bill Cheney, director of maintenance; Kenzie Fowles, inventory and logistics manager; Danielle Jones, accounting; and Teresa Davis and Nicole Miller, national sales.

at a glance

Rocky Mountain Pies

75,000 square feet

4 processing lines

2 packaging lines



After a lift deposits the pie crust dough, it is divided into long strips that are manually fed into the machine and turned into sheets of pie crust.

When the veterans of the pie business started Rocky Mountain Pies, they understood what was important to them and how they wanted to structure their operation. They didn't want to be the biggest, but they did want to be the best.

"Without quality, you have nothing," Grandinetti emphasized. "It all begins with quality products, best-in-class service, and going the extra mile for your customers and employees while striving to be the best."

Under Western Country Pies, the business had to raise prices twice on only one product — cherry pies — in the eight years Grandinetti ran the business, when the cherry crop froze. Rocky Mountain Pies hasn't been as lucky.

"This is probably the most difficult time I've ever had in business," he said. "Staying ahead of the curve, and all the changes that happen almost weekly, it's just insane. We review changes in our staff meeting every day, and we have to react to them. If you don't react, you fail. It is that crazy."

The rising price of milk powders and cherries — again due to freezing — and freight costs are a few of the latest challenges.

"You wake up in the morning and say, 'This isn't fair,' but eventually you have to step on the gas pedal, get creative and figure it out, and that's the path we chose," Grandinetti said. "We rely on our experience, look at it as another challenge and go forward to make the best of the economy that we're in."

Because of their commitment to quality, the company has rejected adjusting their formulas. Instead, they try to keep abreast of potential problems and find a way around them.

"Obviously, you work every angle and try to buy better or buy ahead or do things that you know can help you through a season," he said.

Training a new generation

For those making their living in the pie business, creativity can go a long way toward keeping the lights on. Most pies are bought and consumed during the holidays, so during the first nine months of the year, it's a challenge to get more pies into shoppers' hands.

"Nobody's thinking about a pie as they walk into a grocery store January through September," Grandinetti said. "So we've got to help our customers with ideas, creativity, events, whatever it might be to grow that business. And if we can do that for them, then that helps the rest of our year be more successful. That's the game we like to play, and that's the message we deliver when we're in meetings with our customers. 'We're going to help you grow your business and create excitement.' "

New flavors, formats and eating occasions, like Pi Day — which is March 14 or 3/14, the mathematical number that begins 3.14 — provide fun new ways to dive into pie, and Rocky Mountain Pies embraces them all. Consumers have embraced Pi Day, too, hosting pie parties at work and bringing them home for dinner.

"We've said for several years now that our mission is to train a new generation of pie eaters," Grandinetti said. "We've done our part by creating new products, sizes and flavor profiles."

For Pi Day, the company supports pie display contests for its customers for the best decorated store, with the winner receiving gift cards and a pizza party for employees.

The bakery also produces 6-inch pies and half pies to appeal to smaller households and those interested in indulging but not too much.

"This younger generation, they're worried about

Pumpkin filling travels a short distance to troughs then it's cooled and refrigerated for 12 hours before it is pumped into pie tins.



The new pie line has improved capacity and efficiency, helping the bakery ramp up production.

sweets, so they've backed away a little bit from them," Grandinetti said. "We've got our half pie now, and we're trying to stop the cart that way. We have a lot of our retailers even cutting pies into slices to grow incremental sales."

With more than 700 SKUs and around 140 flavors, the company is willing to try new products to respond to customer requests and entice shoppers, especially during that early-year lull. It's all part of the game.

"We have a Red, White and Blue pie, which is three pies in one, packed in an American flag box," he said. "We've had that pie for a long time. That's been one of our tools to grow incremental sales from Memorial Day to Labor Day, and a highlight here on the Fourth of July."



This all-American pie is equal sections of cherry, apple and berry under a lattice crust. New flavors include Roasted Coconut Caramel, Chocolate Peanut Butter and Chocolate Peanut Butter Silk as well as a Cookie Butter Caramel pie. While consumers may be limiting their pie portions, they don't appear to be in a mood to skimp on taste.

"When we operated our first pie company, we had a competitor who had just sold to a national brand, and the national brand was trying to leverage their success with one of their low-fat cookie product lines into the pie category," Grandinetti said. "We pivoted and created our own low-fat pie to counter and sold exactly 12 cases. Our competitor is now out of business. The lesson learned was if you are going to indulge and eat dessert, do it right."

Rocky Mountain Pies gets inspiration from a number of areas, including ice cream flavors, coffee shops and more.

"A lot of our new products were inspired by a dish or dessert we've enjoyed and then decided would make a great pie or cobbler," Grandinetti said. "We recently were enjoying a side dish at a national steakhouse, 'sweet potato souffle.' We now have a sweet potato souffle pie and cobbler, and the interest from our customer base has exploded for the upcoming holiday season."

Running a tight ship

In 2024, leaders determined that one of the bakery's pie lines needed to be replaced, prompting them to start



working with Colborne Foodbotics to identify a new line. The bakery was looking to boost capacity and quality while reducing downtime, and the new line was installed mid-June last year.

"The new pie machine has proved to be a great addition to our business, giving us capacity to grow," Grandinetti said.

He credits Kirmer with providing a host of improvements in the bakery that have increased capacity without the need to expand into more space, including the egg wash machine and caramel drizzler that have made these tasks easier and eliminated waste in those areas. The bakery was bursting at the seams before he arrived, but he has helped them make a number of improvements.

"We brought Craig in here and said, 'We need to increase capacity on the cream line and the 90 (pie line),'" Grandinetti said. "If we were to add the days and times up, we probably have a shift a day to add capacity."

The business also uses two freezer warehouses in Utah to store its pies, which are all frozen before being shipped, and they have another facility in Illinois for East Coast distribution.



The bakery's utility lines handle smaller orders, but this one can still produce 7,500 to 8,000 pies a day.

To ensure the most efficient production possible, the bakery developed a traveler for each pie. These are documents that follow each product run throughout the manufacturing process to ensure all equipment settings, weights, quality assurance checks and more are done to spec.

"We created our own dashboard to track key areas we've identified to manage our daily production results, service levels, labor results, quality, inventory levels versus open orders, preventative maintenance, safety, employee issues, sales opportunities, innova-

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tion, pie review, etc.," Grandinetti said. "Each of these topics and more are reviewed and tracked every morning in our daily staff meeting."

He added that Capener has instilled a strong SQF culture throughout the plant.

Because customers were eager to get their holiday pies a little earlier this year, Rocky Mountain Pies started making them in mid-June, which was sooner than normal.

"You have to get a running start at the holiday season," he said. "The demand is beyond belief. It's a blessing."

Lines for larger, smaller runs

Because of the seasonal nature of pies, Rocky Mountain Pies employs 150 to 200 workers, depending on the time of year. The SQF-certified bakery runs three shifts five days a week half of the year, with the other half running six or seven days. And when the bakery is busy, the second and third shifts expand to meet demand.

The bakery takes training seriously to ensure success for all. That includes pre-employment training, annual GMP and SQF off-premises training, daily line safety and monthly safety meetings.

"If we're asking them to do something different and unique, we need to take a half step back and study that and give them the tools to do that right," Grandinetti said. "And if we don't, it's our fault, not theirs."

The bakery gets busy when it shifts into full holiday production.

"Third shift right now is 28 employees, and 15 are on sanitation. That will blow up from 28 production to over 50, and same with second shift."

The bakery has two pie processing lines and two utility stations for smaller orders, as well as two packaging lines. On the day of *Baking & Snack*'s visit, the bakery was making pumpkin pies on its newer Colborne S-90 pie line, lemon meringue pies on its custom-built IBL cream pie line and caramel apple pies on one of its utility lines.

Most of the pie fillings begin in one of the two 300-gallon Lee cook kettles. Once the kettles are manually loaded and the fillings are mixed and cooked, they are pumped into troughs for 12 hours of cooling and refrigeration before being made into the pies. The bakery makes sure the fillings travel short distances both from the Lee kettles and to the processing lines to ensure fruit fillings stay intact.

The pastry pie crust is produced in an 800-lb capacity Shaffer horizontal dough mixer, then is transferred to troughs before being wheeled to the line where they will be used. For cream pies, the shells are



Putting employees front and center benefits bakery

While labor issues continue to vex many bakeries, Rocky Mountain Pies is lucky enough to have a waiting list of people interested in working there.

Mark "Par" Grandinetti credits Eric Carcellero, director of human resources, with creating a positive culture in which associates feel appreciated. Carcellero greets employees when they arrive at the bakery and thanks them at the end of the day.

"What he does to maintain and retain the people is magic," Grandinetti said. "He's got an open-door policy in his office. He helps them with their needs, and then because of all that, because they feel welcome here, they bring their family members to work here."

The company has a Top Banana award, which is an employee of the month for each shift, a quarterly top team award, employee events, cash awards and contests around the holidays, as well as language ambassadors among the staff.

The bakery's workers speak nine different languages — they've managed more — and that has created problems in the past. But employees wearing light blue shirts are designated interpreters for fellow employees, explaining procedures and smoothing the way for those facing a language barrier.

"That was one of the first challenges I gave Eric when he came aboard," Grandinetti said. "I said, 'Eric, we really have a language problem out here, so we need to come up with a system and a program for folks so that they know they have somebody they can talk to and explain things and train them,' and so this language ambassador program helps."





The production of holiday items like these pumpkin pies began in mid-June because customers wanted to have them in their freezers early.

pre-baked upside-down in either the Baker Perkins tunnel oven or one of the Baxter rotating deck ovens. To prevent the crust from shrinking, they are baked with another tin inside.

Three 120-quart Hobart mixers are used to produce graham cracker and cookie crumb crusts as well as the filling for French silk pies, which are produced on the second utility line.

Pie dough that is not prebaked is wheeled to the new Colborne line, which makes fruit and holiday pies like pecan and pumpkin. The company produces 6-, 8-, 9-, 10- and 12-inch pies on this line. A lift dumps the dough into the divider that produces long, thick lines of dough that are manually fed into the line, which produces individual sheets placed in pie tins. The line has two rows, one for the bottom crust and another for the top when making double-crust pies.

On the day of *Baking & Snack*'s visit, the sheets for pumpkin pie were centered manually before being stamped and trimmed. The line has three nozzles that simultaneously deposit pumpkin filling before the pies travel several feet on Dorner conveyors to the oven. The distance provides enough space for workers to manually place strips of dough atop fruit pies for the handmade look of the company's twisted and traditional lattice pies when they are in production.

The pies are automatically fed into the tunnel oven. After baking, an operator pulls them onto a Dorner conveyor where they are racked and ambiently cooled for an hour or two before being frozen.

On the IBL cream pie line, which can produce 6-, 8- and 9-inch pies and square cobblers, prebaked pie shells are manually fed into the machine and travel to the depositor via Shuttleworth conveyors. A lemon filling then a meringue is deposited before workers hand peak the meringues, after which the pies go to an integrated meringue oven. This line can also apply a cream topping. Pies are then racked and frozen before going to one of the packaging lines.

On the Colborne utility line, workers are positioned around a rotating band producing apple pies. A divider feeds squares of pie crust dough to a worker who manually runs them through a sheeter and places the sheets in a tin. Apple filling is manually scooped in, then a top crust is placed and crimped and trimmed by the machinery. The pies are then racked before they are run through the Bakon pie glazer, applying an egg wash that gives them their flaky top crust. The



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egg wash is stored below the applicator in a refrigerated bin, allowing excess to be recirculated.

Pies are racked and manually fed into one of five Baxter rotary deck ovens. After baking, they are racked again and wheeled into the freezer before being fed through the Fritsch caramel drizzler, which recirculates the caramel. On this day the pies are covered completely, but the drizzler can apply a decorative pattern as well. The pies are manually boxed, sent through a Loma Systems metal detector and manually cartoned before moving to the Lantech pallet wrapper.

All packaging lines use Loma metal detectors and Quadrel labeling equipment. During busy periods, the bakery uses a Praxair spiral freezer, otherwise pies are frozen in the bakery's on-site freezer. Then they are wheeled to one of the packaging lines where they are manually placed in either a box or a plastic container with a domed lid. Keyence UPC cameras and scanners ensure proper labeling before they are loaded into cartons. Lantech case erectors and shrink wrap machines are used when packaging large orders.

Homemade touches like hand-peaked meringue and hand-laid lattice are points of differentiation for the bakery.

Despite the myriad challenges of running a pie bakery, Grandinetti is confident as he looks to the future at Rocky Mountain Pies.

If the bakery stays focused on what's important and adjusts quickly when conditions change, he can clearly see what's coming and stick the landing.

"We plan to shower our customers with best-in-class service, create exciting innovative products that will help our customers grow incremental pie sales, take care of our employee base and be an industry leader in the pie category," he said.

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