

PILLARS OF PITA

Celebrating its 25th year, Papa Pita Bakery presses forward thanks to the quality of its products and the character of its employees.



BY STEVE BERNE

A quarter century ago, Farzad and his wife Yolanda Mohebbsi couldn't have imagined the success they face today. Taking over a struggling storefront pita shop from his father, in the process giving up a promising career as an electrical engineer at Boeing, Mr. Mohebbsi, an Iranian-born American, knew a thing or two about hard work and determination.

"It was extremely difficult in the beginning," Mr. Mohebbsi recalled. "All we knew was pita, but I quickly realized we needed to diversify to attract business. Bagels were starting to take off, but we made a catastrophic error in judgment of introducing New York-style bagels to a market that only knew soft bagels." That was a major setback.

After numerous attempts and years of struggling at the brink of bankruptcy, determination began to reap rewards. Papa Pita Bakery, Salt Lake City, UT, eventually moved from the storefront to a 10,000-sq-ft space with its bagel and pita line, and it started offering Greek flatbread as well as pocket pita and soft bagels. The quality of its products began attracting food service and retail customers from Las Vegas, Boise and beyond.

"When we first moved into the space, my father suggested leasing half of it to someone else so we would at least have some income," Mr. Mohebbsi quipped. "We didn't and within a few years had filled the space to capacity. When we relocated to the present 60,000-sq-ft building in 2001, I silently asked myself the same question my father asked me, 'What was I going to do with all this space?'"

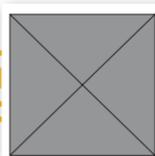
Since this latest move, Papa Pita has added a semi-



▲ Success is all about dedication and teamwork according to Farzad Mohebbsi (third from right), president, Papa Pita, with his core management team of (from left) Alex Rodriguez, Tony Durrant, Nathan Hunt, Yolanda Mohebbsi, Will Durrant and Jim Fuller.

automated bread and roll line and a dedicated tortilla line, and it is once again close to physical capacity. "We still have capacity on all our lines but feel certain these will be taken up during the next two years," Mr. Mohebbsi said.

Papa Pita is in the middle planning stage of a 50,000-sq-ft expansion on its 5-acre site. Plans are to



move all packaging and shipping to the new building and dedicate the current facility to makeup and production. A new high-volume fully automated bread line will also be added, which will include a high-speed ingredient handling system and 2,000-lb sponge-and-dough mixers, along with all the appropriate makeup, production and packaging systems.

Much of the infrastructure for the expansion is already in place. This was done two years ago when the company added the high-speed tortilla line. Space was allotted for additional silos, and power, air and gas capacity, water supply, drainage — all mechanicals — were installed then with the expansion in mind. “All we need is equipment, high-volume silos, material handling systems and packaging equipment,” Mr. Mohebbi said. “Many of these systems have already been bid and decided on.”

DRIVING DIVERSITY. Sales at Papa Pita currently stand at approximately \$14 million with 35% food service and 65% retail. Food service is the fastest growing part of its business, and Mr. Mohebbi predicted that the ratio will be 50:50 by the end of 2009, even with current economic conditions and trends.

“Customer habits may be changing, but our core business is growing at double-digit speed,” Mr. Mohebbi noted. “Our products have distinctly different tastes and textures. We have never cut corners on ingredients or equipment even with commodity costs rising. Our formulas are very rich in flavor and appearance.”

The company, like many others, has focused on improving efficiencies and tightening operations as much as possible. “We rely on management and employees to be diligent and conscientious and to be aware of every aspect of the plant to control costs,” Mr. Mohebbi said.

Papa Pita’s core management team includes Nathan Hunt, vice-president, operations. Joining the company in 2005, he began as a mixer and has worked every position in the plant. Mr. Hunt was born in Iran and immigrated to the US. He became a citizen, joined the Army as an explosives expert and saw several tours of duty in Iraq. He was injured during his most recent tour by an improvised explosive device, which blew apart his knee. He is still on reserve duty.

Jim Fuller joined the company three years ago with Durrant’s and now is the production manager of the tortilla and pita line and was previously with Durrant’s Baking, a bread baker acquired by Papa Pita. Will Durrant and his brother Anthony (Tony) were president and assistant manager at the family bakery prior to the merger. Will Durrant is now overall production manager at Papa Pita. He also oversees R&D and helps with sales. Tony Durrant is now the production manager on the bread and roll line as well as R&D.

Durrant’s Baking was started by Will and Tony’s father, an AIB graduate. The company had two bakeries in Utah



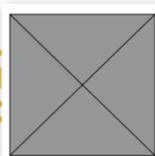
▲ Farzad Mohebbi pauses with oven operator Aquileo Tinoco to discuss bagel quality.

serving the food service market. It produced a full gamut of bread items as well as donuts, muffins and cakes. Both Will and Tony took the AIB correspondence course.

“At the time, Papa Pita was mainly retail with bagels and food service for pita and newly introduced tortillas,” Mr. Mohebbi said. “The merger was an excellent complementary arrangement. It made Papa Pita a 1-stop shop for bakery items throughout Utah and beyond in high-end food service and retail markets.”

BRAINS THEN BRAWN. The personality and work ethic of all the company’s managers are gratifying to Mr. Mohebbi. “You can’t teach character,” he said. “If that’s in line, everything else can be taught.”

The last member of the production team is Alejandro (Alex) Rodriguez, production manager for the bagel line. He has been with Papa Pita for 10 years and is a native of Mexico. “Bagels were the biggest part of the business back then, and Alex worked his way through every position on the line, working long days — some stretching to 18 hours,” Mr. Mohebbi recalled. “All my managers have a



dedication that is unimaginable.

"Teamwork is what makes this bakery successful," he added. "I take it very personally. Our friendships and relationships go beyond the factory, and that helps set up a very productive environment. There is a high level of trust and empowerment here. My managers have this same philosophy with the employees who report to them. We live by our words and our actions."

"We are all hands-on managers," Mr. Hunt said. "Perhaps that is because many of us worked our way up through the ranks. It is in our culture. We have one office, one team, where no one is too important or not important enough." While it might state "Papa Pita" on the package, employees take great individual pride and responsibility and treat each product as if it had their personal name on it. The managers often say to Mr. Mohebbi, "this may be your bakery, but it is our product."

The most recent addition to the team was Dustin Baker, director of sales. He is located in Las Vegas, NV, at the company-owned distribution center (DC), which opened in August. "We currently have seven routes and will be adding three more by Jan. 1," Mr. Mohebbi said. "We have never been in the trucking or delivery business before so we are learning as we go, but we look at this

as an advantage because we can shape the process and procedures. The DC gives us great control and insight into our market. We may expand this program to other cities in the future."

BAKERY CONTROL/EFFICIENCY. Papa Pita employs about 100 people, 90 of which are at the bakery. Sales are seasonal with pita peaking March through September. Conversely, bagels are in high production August through May, mainly for retail. Tortilla sales are steady year-round, and bread is predominately food service, so its volume fluctuates with the tourist seasons and business travel. "In our markets, demand is steady, but distribution shifts throughout the year between Las Vegas, ski resorts and other tourist markets on the West Coast and Midwest," Mr. Mohebbi said.

The company recently implemented Datapax enterprise management software and customized production tracking programs to track costing and waste. "It manages day-to-day cost and efficiency of each line down to last pound and hour," Will Durant said. "From inventory to ingredient and product flow, it is totally integrated. Deviations are automatically identified, noted and flagged for improvement."

"The biggest gain to efficiency has been in scaling," Mr. Hunt said. "We now have tighter control of weights and minimize product giveaway. Our yields have improved by more than 5%."

It helps consistency in scaling, so batches are absolutely repeatable. This, in turn, allows the dough dividers to be more accurate. All this adds to the efficiency improvement. The system also provides full traceability down to lot number for each ingredient of each item made.

MARKET AND PLANT CAPACITY. Papa Pita markets its products throughout the Western US, and there is no shortage of market area, according to Mr. Mohebbi. Strategy for growth and expansion was to diversify, which it did by adding the bread and tortilla lines. "Salt Lake City is near the epicenter of many of the major markets we serve," he said. "Cities such as San Diego, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Phoenix, Denver, Boise and Las Vegas are all within a 700-mile radius of the plant."

According to management, it is still effective to ship fresh product. "Within 8 to 12 hours, our products can be in any of these market areas," Mr. Mohebbi noted. "And by having enough diversity in products to fill a full truck, we avoid having to ship a full truck of any one product, which then would have to go to cold storage. With product diversity, all products can enter a market fresh every day."



◀ Jim Fuller, production manager, inspects tortillas as they exit the oven where they bake for 22 seconds at 400°F.



Operations are nimble enough to accommodate 24-hour turnaround, but generally orders are placed with a 5-day lead and allow changes to within 48 hours of production.

The plant has plenty of capacity on all its lines: 50% remains on both tortilla and pita, more than 50% for bread and rolls after the upcoming expansion and plenty on the bagel line as well.

The facility uses four KB Systems 100,000-lb indoor silos. The company is looking at a Shick USA outdoor silo system for the new bread and roll line because that line will need high-speed delivery and capacity.

Liquids are delivered in bulk totes and drums for now, but the company will install automated bulk liquid sugar and oil systems in the future.

The new data management system will soon integrate a Doran scale system for hand-weighed items. Programmed formulas will call for specific ingredients to be scaled and verified. It will track lot numbers as well.

Dough makeup relies on three Shaffer 1,000-lb mixers for bread, pita and bagel, and one Peerless 1,000-lb mixer for the tortilla line. Operations also use several Hobart and Global spiral mixers for specialty products and production runs.

Keeping up with trends

All Papa Pita products are trans fat free and free of major allergens other than wheat. The company tries to maintain clean labels with all-natural ingredients. It recently introduced high-fiber products incorporating oat fiber, amylo-cellulose, wheat bran and other healthy components.

With continued growth in flavored wraps the company recently developed its Wrapido tortilla brand to take advantage of this market, and it includes varieties such as Chili Herb, Salsa Verde, Chipotle, Garlic & Herb, Whole-Wheat, Tomato, Sun-Dried Tomato Basil, Spinach as well as uncooked tortillas.

“On the bagel line, we still retard bagels for eight hours to more fully develop the taste and texture that make our products distinct,” Mr. Mohebbi said. “Many companies bypass this step. Our formulas are very rich in the quality and quantity of inclusions such as raisins, cinnamon and blueberries as well as the flavor of the dough.”

“We run about 4,000 lb of dough per hour in the jacketed mixer,” Mr. Rodriguez noted. “Temperature control is critical. Another distinction is that we only deposit 15 bagels on each pan versus 24. This eliminates bagels butting together during baking and assures each bagel is perfectly round, with consistent color and crust texture.



▲ Samuel Revolorio oversees the double divider in the makeup area on the tortilla line.

It is a bit less efficient, but it is worth it.” Bagel production uses a Baking Machines dual-lane former and automated pan feeder.

Bagels bake in nine supersized Adamatic rack ovens designed to feed high levels of steam for the product. “We use filtered soft water, and the ovens have larger burners to help recoup heat loss faster compared with other rack ovens,” Mr. Mohebbi added.

Throughput is roughly 24,000 bagels per hour. After baking, bagels cool for about 90 minutes in a high-humidity, low-velocity cooler. Products go through a LeMatic slicer followed by a Formost shaker table that lanes and tips the bagels, feeding them six at a time into shoots above the Formost bagger. Bags are clipped using a Kwikklok system and packed in trays.

Greek flatbread and pocket pita are produced on a second processing line. Batches run between 800 and 1,000 lb in jacketed mixers and then are allowed to age or rest in dough troughs between 20 and 30 minutes, a critical step to develop flavor, taste and color. Properly forming

the pockets during baking requires close control of dough temperature, fermentation and other factors. Throughput is 2,500 to 3,000 lb of dough per hour.

“Greek pita and pocket items are completely different formulas and processes,” Mr. Fuller said. Both doughs are divided using two Automatic 6-pocket dividers with weight adjustments between 1 and 8 oz. Intermediate proofing time is roughly 14 minutes.

Products are then flattened through three different cross sheeters before entering the second proofer — a C.H. Babb system using 1,500 ft of belting. Greek pita is then docked and hand stretched if required. All products pass under a Spray Dynamics system, which lays down an optional mist of oil or flavoring.

Greek pita bakes in a C.H. Babb 30-ft 3-zone oven for between 25 and 35 seconds at 780°F, while

Phoenix Rising

Yolanda Mohebbi is the backbone of the business, according to her husband, Farzad Mohebbi, president of Papa Pita. “She has been instrumental in identifying and seeing that the little things get done. I could not be successful without her. She is also responsible for all our marketing concepts and ideas.”

Mr. Mohebbi, an electrical engineer by training, is Iranian born. His father fled to the US during the uprising that ousted the Shah, and he was able to bring the rest of his family to America once he was settled. His father eventually opened a small storefront pita bakery but had a very hard time making ends meet and was at the verge of closing the shop.

Mr. Mohebbi worked his way through college and after graduation was going from Albuquerque, NM, to Seattle, WA, for a job at Boeing. He stopped off in Salt Lake City to spend time with his family and never left. He worked with his father to turn the bakery around. Eventually taking over the business, he, too, struggled for a long time to make it succeed.

“I soon realized we needed to diversify and attempted to add bagels, a growing trend at the time,” he said. “The problem was I tried to sell New-York style bagels, and it was a complete failure. The market wanted soft bagels. However, when we did come up with a softer bagel, they still didn’t sell them because of preconceived market impressions. It was Yolanda’s idea to discard all bagel packaging and refocus the whole campaign around the word ‘soft.’ This did the trick, and sales took off. Life and business is an ongoing learning process.”

pocket pita requires 28 to 40 seconds at 900°F. “Time and temperature change based on dough properties, and it is a continual process to monitor and adjust the time,” Mr. Fuller noted. “With less than one minute in the oven, we see results almost immediately and can make adjustments as needed.”

An I.J. White ambient spiral conveyor lets the products cool for 35 minutes before a UBE stacker/bagger finishes the process.

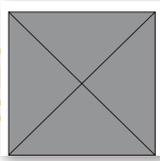
“Greek pita is unique formula,” Mr. Mohebbi added. “It is very pliable and tasty. We use a rich formula that contributes to the flavor and also allows the product multiple uses — certainly for gyro sandwiches but also as pizza crust, soft taco or even by itself.”

NEW DELIVERABLES. The bread and tortilla lines are the latest additions to Papa Pita. Bread and rolls use a sponge-and-dough process, which starts four hours ahead of makeup.

After final mixing in the Shaffer 1,000-lb mixer, dough runs through a Glimek divider with adjustable weights between 8 oz and 3 lb. A conical rounder and

◀ Pocket pitas cool on a spiral conveyor for 35 minutes. Pitas discharge from the oven in the background.





15-minute overhead proofer prepare roll dough for the Blumhof moulder and panner, while bread dough feeds into an AMF double-lane double-drop moulder/panner.

Breads and rolls also are baked in the Adamatic rack ovens used for bagels. Some require cooling and retarding first, and some require steam during baking, varying based on formula. After cooling, a Bettendorf slicer/bagger completes the bread process. Throughput on this line is about 3,000 units per hour. For rolls, a full complement of items from bread sticks to hamburger and hot dog buns to soft dinner rolls are packed for food service delivery.

The plant also produces specialty items such as short and long braided loaves, multi-variety braided items, French and Italian breads and ciabatta. "Bread and roll products are very high-end as are our bagels and pita bread, but very cost competitive with the standard fare of national brands in the same markets," Mr. Mohebbi said. Bread doughs are fermented with low yeast levels at cool temperatures to maximize flavor and taste. Many of the bread doughs ferment for 24 hours at 60°F.

The newest line at the bakery is dedicated to tortillas — fully equipped with Lawrence Equipment components. Space for the line was planned as part of the move from the company's previous 10,000-sq-ft plant. "We didn't know at the time what would fill the space

▼ Nathan Hunt (left) and Jim Fuller inspect finished packages of tortillas.



▲ Tortilla dough balls drop to the top of the prepress on the tortilla line.

but anticipated up to two additional lines in the current facility," Mr. Mohebbi noted. "We upgraded the air and power capacity to accommodate the line, but when I did this, I made sure there were sufficient amounts of infrastructure for the next expansion."

Tortilla is a straight-dough operation. A Peerless 1,000-lb mixer produces up to five batches per hour. Products range from 1 to 8 oz, which equates to 6- to 15-in. diameter tortillas. Finished dough is chunked and elevated to the hopper of a Werner & Pfleiderer double-drop 9-pocket divider. From there dough balls enter the Lawrence 9,000-cup intermediate proofer, which feeds the double press. The system can drop 4, 9 or 16 dough balls into each press depending on the size of the desired tortilla. Dough balls are prepressed and then heat pressed under 1,500 lb of pressure.

Products are cooked in a 3-pass tunnel oven at 400°F for 22 seconds followed by conditioned air cooling. Prior to packing, tortillas pass under a vision inspection system that measures size, shape, color, toast points, translucency and thickness. Air knives are used to reject out-of-spec product.

Throughout its rocky start and more subsequent achievements, success for Papa Pita comes down to monitoring, controlling, fixing or improving the little things. "There are so many more of those types of items that add up to big savings," Mr. Mohebbi concluded. "The big things are obvious, and many have big costs and long ROIs attached. But it's the little things like breakdowns, production scheduling, training and employee empowerment, responsibility and accountability that tip the scale. Employee attitude and ownership was a huge initiative, and our success wouldn't have been possible without that." ■