



LIKE MOTHER, LIKE SON

Fresh pasta products upstart off to a sizzling start with its unique range of low-carb, high-protein alternatives catering to the growing health-and-fitness crowd



Gabriella's Kitchen's vice-president of operations Chris Fenn put his last year of university studies in Vancouver on hold in order to accommodate his move to Toronto to take charge of soaring production requirements and customer demand.

There's no better way to prove the skeptics wrong than having the hearty last laugh. And it seems only right that the good folks behind the family-owned pasta products upstart **Gabriella's Kitchen** in Toronto could well be laughing all the way to the bank with their recently-launched **skinnypasta** line of highly innovative, breakthrough fresh pasta products.

Undaunted by their ultimately rejected sales pitch a year ago to the judging panel of the **Canadian Broadcast Corporation (CBC)**'s top-ranked **Dragons' Den** television series—inviting budding

Canadian entrepreneurs to attract additional capital investment for their fledgling business enterprises—the company's founders pooled their resources to make their vision of freshly-made, premium low-carb, high-protein pasta dishes not just a reality, but quite possibly a runaway commercial success.

Already boasting ringing endorsements from numerous high-profile athletes—including Canada's Olympic curling team—the **skinnypasta** line was specifically developed to, as the brand's tagline states, “Love Pasta Again” by drastically reducing traditional white pasta's high levels of carbohydrates



The new folding-carton packaging for the skinnypasta brand has been well-received by major retail customers.

with an all-natural combination of durum wheat and vegetable-based proteins that easily fit into anyone's low-carb, low-calorie eating regimen or diet.

And unlike many meat substitute products out in the market, the hand-crafted pastas deliver a tasty and deeply satisfying meal experience with all the trappings of the authentic, Italian-style pasta dishes beloved by millions of North American consumers of all the major age and demographic groups.

According to the company's 25-year-old vice-president of operations Chris Fenn, the business initially got its start about six years ago after his mother, Margot Micallef, switched to a low-carbohydrate diet—essentially making most of the pasta dishes she enjoyed all her life off limits.

SOMETHING NEW

“Being Italian, this was very hard for her to accept, so after looking all over the market in vain to find a high-protein pasta product, she decided to make her own,” says Fenn, describing the product's early days back at his parent's home residence in Calgary, when the new product was marketed locally under the **Hollywood Foods** brand name.

Largely through the word of mouth, local demand for the product “just went crazy,” Fenn recalls.

“We hired a well-known Calgary chef and caterer to produce my mother's recipe for us, and before long people at his many catering functions were besieging him with inquiries about where they could purchase this product,” he relates.

“Soon thereafter, my mother took over the production side of the business and moved it to Toronto, where my aunt Gabriella took over the day-to-day operations,” Fenn relates.

Tragically, Fenn's aunt was soon after diagnosed with terminal lung cancer, which forced his mother to hire an outsider to “baby-sit” the tiny operation for time being.

In 2012, the company acquired another fledgling pasta innovator specializing in gluten-free prepared pasta meals, Toronto-based **Antipastos Kitchen**, thereby expanding its product portfolio to set the stage for Margot and Chris taking over the company on full-time basis in November of 2014.

“Their (Antipastos) vision really matched our own company's vision, which is to give people food that they can all enjoy together,” Fenn states.

“Just because one person in the family or other group



The Ross Inpack tray-sealer distributed by Reiser produces two gas-flushed, fully-sealed tray packages per cycle.



Assistant packaging team supervisor Romnie Brunacciomi, the company's longest-serving employee, holds up a tray of finished packages, sealed on the Ross Inpack tray-sealer behind him, ready to be inserted inside the folding cartons.

may have a dietary restriction, it doesn't mean that person has to be served a special meal," Fenn explains.

"We want to make food that not only caters to people's dietary needs," he points out, "but is also so delicious that everybody in the group will enjoy it."

"So it was a natural fit for both companies," says Fenn, who had to put his last years of undergraduate studies at the **University of British Columbia (UBC)** in Vancouver on hold to make his move to Toronto to take on the company reins.

Given the exceptionally quick embrace of the company's products by major retailers, that last year of may have to wait a bit, as Gabriella's Kitchen integrates the remaining *Antipastos* brand products out in the market into its own *skinnypasta* brand label.

The company's biggest retail customer **Loblaws**, says Fenn, is in fact expected to complete the conversion by the end of November—providing the *skinnypasta* brand with plenty of prime retail shelf-space in the frozen-food aisles of its supermarkets.

Comprising high-protein, gluten-free and the so-

called 'superfood' product offerings, the revamped brand family currently comprises nine different stock-keeping units (SKUs), including:

- **Superfood.** Made from the Teff grass grain native to Ethiopia, the 200-gram *skinnypasta Teff Penne* pack offers two servings of a highly nutritious side-dish loaded with remarkably high calcium, iron, magnesium, and *Vitamin C* content, with only 230 calories per serving and zero cholesterol.
- **Gluten-Free.** Formulated with a proprietary blend of ingredients to deliver authentic Italian taste and texture, the 300-gram entrées include *skinnypasta Gnocci in Pomodoro Sauce* and *skinnypasta Roasted Vegetable Lasagna*: both made with no gluten or wheat; no rice or corn; no additives or preservatives; and no soy, artificial flavors or GMOs.

Also offered in dairy-free options, the *Gnocci* entrée contains only 270 calories, while the 420-calorie lasagna entrée packs 21 grams of protein derived from fresh vegetable ingredients.

The Gluten-Free line also comprises both regular and dairy-free versions of *skinnypasta Ravioli* and a *skinnypasta Manicotti* offering.

- **High Protein.** Made from all-natural ingredients and fortified with vegetarian protein from non-GMO (genetically-modified organism) sources, the *skinnypasta Spaghetti*, *Linguine* and *Fettuccine* contain no corn rice, additives or preservatives, with each 250-gram pack providing 13 grams of protein per one 63-gram serving, with only 110 calories and 75 grams of sodium per serving.

The secret to achieving the products' high-protein content, according to Fenn, lies in finding the right balance between the raw pre-mixed flour blends and the vegetables used to fortify them with protein.

"Our high-protein products use the same durum wheat semolina that is used in Italy to make their pasta, except a lot less of it, which we enhance with pea and soy protein," Fenn explains.

"Because this makes the pasta a lot more delicate, it takes a lot more work to reach the desired con-



A Gabriella's Kitchen production team member cuts the thick layers of pasta dough produced on the Agnelli pasta-making machine into precisely-measured slabs to go inside a collator for repeated pressing into the desired thinness.



Finished trays of freshly-made skinnypasta linguini wait their turn to be inserted inside the new folding cartons.



Depending on operator speed, the Ross Inpack tray-sealer can produce from eight to 12 finished packs per minute.



A semi-automatic Eastey case-sealer is positioned close to the Squid Ink case-coder in order to make optimal use of Gabriella's Kitchen's very limited available space to take care of all the necessary secondary packaging requirements.



Model CO Pilot 382 case-coder springs into action to apply product barcode and other graphics onto the loaded carton. A close-up of the broad range of character sizes and fonts produced by Squid Ink's model CO Pilot 382 case-coder.

sistency and firmness,” he says, noting that the thick sheets of fresh pasta dough coming out of the plant’s made-in-Italy **Agnelli** model **A-250** pasta machine are typically flattened and reprocessed at the operation’s pasta-making calibrator machine about 15 times to get to the ready-to-cut stage.

“We think of ourselves as a hand-made mass-production operation turning out a hand-made product,” says Fenn. “It is a very labor-intensive process to feed the machine to press the dough together.”

To get its dietary and nutritional message across loud and clear, the *skinny*pasta brand makes effective use of the text, graphics, product photography, symbols and other visual cues on all sides and panels of the litho-printed, 100-percent-recycled-content paperboard folding cartons supplied to the company’s 4,000-square-foot kitchen in west-end Toronto by a local print-shop **Colour Innovations**.

Many of the brand’s recently-updated packages—de-

signed by a U.S.-based marketing group **Doner**—also feature a large front-panel cutout that lets consumers have a good look at freshly-crafted pasta packed inside a fully-recyclable black plastic tray lidded with a layer of high-barrier, transparent plastic film to obtain maximum shelf-life for the gas-flushed contents.

“We get six-week product shelf-life for the refrigerated products, and up to a year in the freezer,” says Fenn, noting that any unused product can remain in edible state for up to a week in the home fridge after the package has been initially opened.

“The product also expands after it’s been cooked in boiling water, so in the package nets consumers about 500 grams of finished cooked product,” says Fenn, citing ease-of-cooking as another one of the product’s appealing traits.

“It cooks just like the regular pasta, but because it is never dried out, it’s ready in just one to two minutes in boiling water.

“Basically, the consumer gets one-third of the carbs and three times the protein of the regular commercial pasta serving,” he states. “That’s about the same amount of protein that you would get from consuming a small steak or chicken breast.

“As such, product offers a great option as a source of protein for people who don’t eat meat,” he points out, “and it’s also very safe to eat for diabetics because it does not spike up the glycemic index, being so low in carbs.

“But above all, it’s a product for people who care about what they’re eating and who want to eat all-natural products,” says Fenn, citing a growing number of high-caliber, top-tiered athletes that have openly endorsed the product on the company’s *Ambassador Program* website page.

TEAM SPIRIT

“Guys on the Canadian curling team swear by this product,” he extols. “It is a huge vote of confidence to have guys who take care of their bodies and what they put into their bodies to endorse our product like that.”

Such warm feedback has enabled Gabriella’s Kitchen to build up a fast-growing fan following not only across Canada, Fenn relates, but also in the health-and-fitness-obsessed southern California—especially among many women on low-carb diets longing for pasta’s taste and comforts.

“We had run a very successful billboard and food-truck marketing campaign in the Los Angeles area, drawing enough interest to justify serving that market directly with full-truckload shipments,” Fenn relates, citing equally glowing feedback from across Canada.

“We have had the product sampled at many trade-shows and stores, and the feedback that we get is just terrific, with people telling us, ‘I can’t believe this is actually good for you!’,” he relates.

This overwhelmingly positive reception is already translating into surging demand for the product amongst retailers, according to Fenn, with his 20-employee staff scrambling to keep pace by running four daily shifts—two for production and two for packaging—five-days-a-week.

“The growth we have achieved in the last nine months has been extraordinary,” he beams. “We have just shipped an order out west to CO-OP (Federated Co-operatives Ltd.) that equaled half of our entire production output in the previous year.

“We went from simply fulfilling orders to actually building an inventory, and running our operation in a sustainable way in terms of growth,” he adds. “Our goal at the moment is to get to 15 pallets, or 14,400 units, per day, and we’re about a third of the way there.

“We are constantly adding new machinery and staff members to the team,” he says, “but if demand outstrips our capacity to supply it, we may well have to add a third shift to keep up, as well as move to a bigger location.”

To accommodate the growth, the company has recently installed a **Ross Industries** semi-automatic model **Inpack** tray-sealer—distributed by leading food packaging equipment supplier **Reiser** of Canton, MA.—to apply the top layer of high-barrier plastic film to the plastic trays containing the fresh-made pasta, two trays at a time, just after gas-flushing them with a nitrogen/carbon-dioxide gas mixture, supplied by **Air Liquide**, to obtain extended product shelf-life.

“It’s been a great machine for us to have,” Fenn states. “The Ross series sealers are the Mercedes of sealing machines, and although we may not yet have a top-of-the-line model that does everything



Sealed tray packages pass through a high-sensitivity quality assurance check by the plant’s S+S brand metal detection system, manufactured by Sesotec, sold by JG Packaging and installed by RJP Packaging.



The S+S metal detector from Sesotec plays a critical role in the plant's quality control and food safety assurance.

automatically, this unit fits our needs perfectly for now with its exceptional reliability and seal integrity.

"The people at Reiser Canada have been superb to deal with," Fenn notes, "and we are already contemplating placing an order with them for another, more automated tray-sealer that will have an integrated conveyor to automate some of the steps."

FLOUR POWER

While Fenn says he's well aware of the need to automate the production flow further down the road, he is not prepared to sacrifice the patient, authentic pasta-making process that makes the company's product so unique.

"The flour blend comes in pre-mixed from our supplier as specified by our special recipe every morning, and we put it into our pasta machine with other key ingredients to make the pasta dough, which comes out in thick sheets," he explains.

"After the dough is made, we put it through the calibrator machine to press it together repeatedly over and over again, up to 15 times, until we reach the desired binding ability and consistency to hold the dough together.

"Only after that's been achieved, we put the pasta into the cutter to cut it into the desired shapes," says Fenn, adding that all the shift changes are times and synchronized so that "the machines never stop running" over the course of each work day.

After the trays are sealed with the barrier film—both supplied by **Celplast Packaging Systems Ltd.**—they pass through an **S+S** brand metal detection system, manufactured by **Sesotec Inc.**, before being inserted into the folding-cartons.

"This metal detector is also a fantastic piece of machinery for us to have," says Fenn, adding the operation is currently going through the process of obtaining formal **HACCP** (*Hazardous Critical Control Points Analysis*) food safety certification.

The filled cases are then taped shut by an **Eastey** case-sealer and passed through the model **CO Pi-**

lot 382 case-coding machine, made by **Squid Ink Manufacturing**, for application of barcodes and all the required variable product information before being placed into the on-site freezer for storage.

While the process is not going to shatter any production speed records any time soon, Fenn allows, "For the amount of product that we turn out in a facility this small, we are a pretty efficient operation."

As for the *Dragons' Den* snub, Fenn says the value the exposure *skinnypasta* gathered with the appearance more than makes up for the panel's cold feet.

"Appearing on the show provided terrific marketing for us: our website actually crashed the day the show aired because of the all the online traffic," he recalls.

"People just could not believe there was such a thing as a low-carb, high-protein, all natural and non-GMO pasta, but we are more than happy to make them believers," he says.

Moreover, Gabriella's Kitchen has been asked by *Dragons' Den* to come back onto the show for an update on the company's progress—scheduled to air in March of 2016—with Fenn naturally expecting a very different reception this time around.

Sometimes, after all, simply living and doing well is the sweetest form of revenge there is. 🍁

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