

# Sunrise Creative Gourmet: A Family Tradition on the Iron Range

**F**our, Eggs, Water and Salt. These four simple ingredients tell the tale of the oldest family-owned bakery in Minnesota located "Up North" in Hibbing.

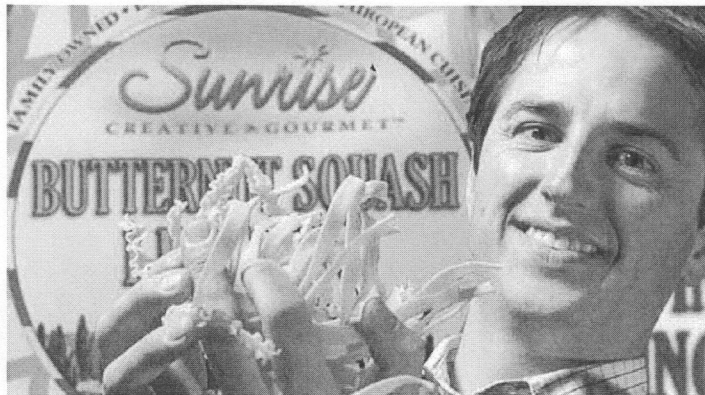
Now run by third- and fourth-generation descendants, the Sunrise Creative Gourmet story begins in 1913, when Giulio Forti left his native Italy after hearing of opportunities to make a good living working in the mines of Northern Minnesota. Upon arriving and discovering the work was more suited to younger men, the trained baker learned of a space for sale in Hibbing, and Sunrise Bakery was born. He and his wife, Virginia, began delivering Italian and Vienna bread by horse-drawn carriages to the mines.

BY SARAH JOHNSON

As the family grew, their children assisted in making deliveries and translating recipes from Italian for Giulio, who never spoke English. Their son, Vince, expanded the business, incorporating pastries, cakes and ethnic specialties for other Iron Range immigrants, such as the Slovenian holiday treat potica, a thinly rolled sweet bread with a moist walnut filling. The pasty, a handheld meat pie filled with vegetables, was a popular on-the-go lunch choice for miners, and Vince's wife, Annie, developed her own variation incorporating pork, bacon, spinach, and potatoes that is still sold today.

The tradition continued with the third generation when Vince's son, Tom, and his wife, Mary, noticed the Lybba Theater in Hibbing was for sale in the early 1980s. Owned by Bob Dylan's uncles, the theater was named after Dylan's grandmother, Lybba Edelstein, with the famous singer-songwriter attending shows there many times while growing up in Hibbing. In 1984, Tom and Mary opened Sunrise Deli, which focused on hot foods and imported groceries. The theater's marquee is still used by the deli today.

With the help of Tom and Mary's son, Tom Jr., a fourth-generation Forti, the business has expanded to include wholesale delivery to more than 50 grocery stores around Minnesota. Tom Forti, Jr., partner at Sunrise Creative Gourmet, says they started with the SuperOne in Hibbing in 2004 and moved to the metro area in 2005. Twin Cities co-ops were among the first to



Tom Forti Jr., partner at Sunrise Creative Gourmet.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PAULA KELLER

embrace them. "Co-ops really legitimized us and were instrumental in the growth of our business," Tom Jr. commented. "I found them to be very honest, accessible and supportive of our products."

Apparently the feeling is mutual. "When we were first approached by Tom Forti to carry the Sunrise Creative Gourmet pasta lines, we carried similar products," said Fern Weiss, purchasing manager at the Wedge Co-op in Minneapolis. "We chose to pick up these two lines to replace big-name products with locally made, superior-tasting and fresher products. We liked the idea of continuing a family tradition that dates from 1913, coming all the way from Rome to settle in Hibbing. Our customers must like the idea as well since these two lines are the most popular in their categories."

Even the ingredients used in production are locally sourced—the flour comes from North Dakota and the rBST-free cheese comes from Wisconsin. Everything is processed in one Hibbing building and is handmade and individually packaged by 10 employees. Drying pasta is the hardest part of the process, according to Tom Jr. The ingredients have to be delicately balanced and the finished product set out to dry for two days before being carefully assembled for distribution.

While a bag of Sunrise Creative Gourmet pasta costs more than a box of the regular store-bought variety, it became apparent how much

pride the family takes in consistently manufacturing a quality product when talking to Tom Jr. "It may sound corny, but we really are on a quest for the perfect pasta," he joked. Most popular product? "Butternut squash anything outsells anything else we have by a margin of two-to-one," Tom Jr. commented. They also offer a line of preservative-free sauces and recipes on their website for those looking for quick dinner ideas.

Italian heritage runs deep on the Iron Range. The Paulucci Space Theatre in Hibbing, the largest planetarium in Northern Minnesota, is named after Jenò Paulucci, who created Jenò's Pizza Rolls. Valentini's Supper Club in Chisholm is a family owned and operated restaurant serving up homemade pastas since 1934. And the Forti family was honored in 2010 with the Hibbing Chamber of Commerce's prestigious Lifetime Achievement Award.

The Fortis do tastings at grocery stores throughout the year and can also be found at local farmers' markets during the summer. "Farmers' markets gave us a lot of momentum as well because they allow us to meet customers and tell our story," says Tom Jr. With nearly 100 years of history behind them, they look to keep sharing that story through good, simply made food.

*Sarah Johnson is a local food enthusiast who has written on health and nutrition topics for local websites including Simple, Good and Tasty and Twin Cities Daily Planet.*

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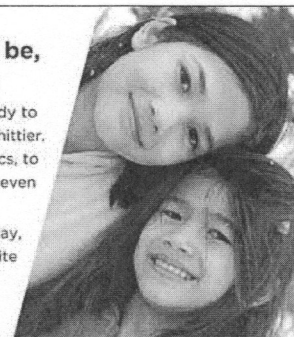
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