

IN THE NEWS: SAUCE SAVVY

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John Buzza, specialist professor in management/marketing, and business students in his entrepreneurship class were featured in the *Asbury Park Press* on Saturday, December 3, 2005.

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Sauce savvy

Monmouth University students mix good business sense with great taste to come up with a recipe for success.

BY ANDREA CLURFELD
STAFF WRITER

Aunt Millie did it. So did Paul Newman and Emeril Lagasse. Big-deal New York City restaurants Patsy's and Rao's tossed their toques in the ring, along with half the cast of "The Sopranos."

So why not a group of students from Monmouth University?

After almost three months of hard and fruitful labors, better make that a group of up-and-coming entrepreneurs. And what they did was develop, produce and market a brand new jarred pasta sauce, which will be introduced to the public Tuesday and, the collegiate entrepreneurs hope, soon will be on the shelves of specialty shops and better supermarkets in the area.

"It's not homework, it's real work," says marketing honcho Tyler Azzarelli. "There's real money at stake."

"It wasn't about getting an A," notes production guru Melissa Paul. "We just wanted this sauce to be out there."

"We looked at the different sauces on the market, the shelf space, the costs," adds R&D wiz Nick Massari, "and ours is competitive."

"It's an everyday job," chimes in designer Laura Cancelosi, "so you have to overcome every obstacle and keep going."

They're not trying to impress Donald Trump on "The Apprentice"; they're trying to make their point: Nanina's in the Park Homemade Marinara Sauce is more than a class project to the 35 students in John Buzza's Entrepreneurship Class at the West Long Branch university.

It's a product they believe in and will feel tied to long after the class calls it a day when the semester ends on Dec. 15.

The tomato-based sauce project was born shortly after classes commenced in September. According to Buzza, the idea was to work as a team, to make collective decisions en route to producing a marketable product.

Food came easily to the group and soon the idea of a jarred pasta sauce took hold. Buzza, who had a long relationship with the restaurant-banquet hall Nanina's in the Park in Belleville, introduced the students to head chef Vincenzo Loreti. A partnership was formed.

Azzarelli, a 22-year-old senior and captain of Monmouth U's basketball team, worked the research end of things, doing surveys on campus and in local supermarkets to gauge tastes. By the time the class trekked to Nanina's to test-taste the 10 sauces Loreti had prepared, they were veritable food critics.

"We chose which one we liked best"—which happened to be the marinara.

Close on its heels were a vodka sauce and a basil-cream sauce. The crew decided to first market the marinara, using the good name of Nanina's as a hook. The runners-up will follow once distribution is secured.

Meanwhile, Massari and the research-and-development team were hard at work. They visited the corporate headquarters of Rao's in New York, garnering tips and techniques from the executives at the upmarket Italian specialty foods producer.

"We use 100 percent tomatoes, no paste at all," says Massari, a 21-year-old senior who is captain of the university's baseball team. That, he believes, will make their sauce a standout.

Cancelosi, a junior and 20 years old, crafted front and back labels dominated by gold and a lyrical script that whispered Italian to her. Melissa Paul, a senior at age 28 who already has graduated culinary school and is completing a degree in management, was part of the team who found the producer, Del Grosso Foods, in Tipton, Pa., that would make it all possible.

That took a lot of calling, a lot of research, Paul admits. Some places were helpful to the college students, while some were downright dismissive. By the time the students took a trip out to Del Grosso to watch the process and taste-test their finished product, they felt certain they'd made another wise business decision.

"If you ever watched 'Laverne & Shirley,' the assembly line scenes, well, it's just like that," Paul says. "They watch the sauces all the time, sterilize the bottles, weigh them, put caps on the bottles. It goes so fast!"

Matt Del Grosso, one of the many family members who run the company, trekked east to Monmouth U and spoke to the students. "They've made themselves very available to us," Paul notes.

Now that the hundreds of cases of Nanina's in the Park Homemade Marinara Sauce have been bottled, Azzarelli is springing into high gear with marketing strategies. The students won't do direct sales, he says, but will work through a distributor to place the sauce in markets. They'll gear up for the Fancy Food Show, to be held next summer in New York City, so they can show off their sauce to buyers and the rest of the specialty-food trade.

As Buzza, a former restaurateur, says, "This project has the kids thinking about the food industry as a business, as a career. Today, the restaurant and food industry has a whole different panache than it did years ago. People dine today rather than just eat. People are much smarter about their food."

Indeed, Azzarelli is as conversant about the restaurant scene in Philadelphia ("I've been to most of the Stephen Starr restaurants there," he says, referring to the uber-restaurateur) as he is about his hometown football team, the Tampa Bay Buccaneers QB "Chris Simms is coming along"), while Paul talks of taking her pastry-chef training to Asbury Park "because it's up-and coming" and opening a coffeehouse—"not a Starbucks, but something cozy." She's already got a menu together, something with a harmonic Broadway theme.

Buzza ticks off the names of other students who gave their all to the pasta sauce project—Jamie Szeliga, Kellie Pyper—and talks of the possibilities a couple may have working for Nanina's as the pasta sauce business grows. Nanina's, he notes, is generously financing the project to the tune of about \$20,000, and has pledged that a percentage of any profits will go toward scholarships at Monmouth U.

For the students, the most valuable lesson was, as Azzarelli says, "learning how to get things done." Moreover, Paul says, "We kind of feel like this is our kid—and it's great to know it's going to be out there and we were a part of it."

"At first, it was a task that seemed too big to accomplish," Cancelosi adds. "But we did it."

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