

The Flavour of Innovation

Adapting old-world recipes and manufacturing processes to current tastes has earned a Thumbs Up from consumers



Fauzia Kanji

In 1996, Fauzia Kanji decided to channel her mother and grandmother's energy and enthusiasm for good food into what she thought would be a small project. She suggested they start a home-based business making roti, or Indian flat-bread, to generate a little income while keeping themselves busy. The results were so delicious, Kanji took some samples to the chef at the Delta Bow Valley hotel in Calgary, where she was employed as an accountant. Within weeks, the flat-bread, based on the family's traditional Tanzanian recipe, was on the menu in the bistro. And Thumbs Up Foods Inc. – featuring fresh ingredients and authentic Indian spices – has been growing ever since under the brand name of Serenna's Gourmet Cuisine.

"We started with friends and family making about 200 roti in eight hours," said Kanji. Working in the basement of the family home, the product line expanded to include samosas and curries, all with a milder flavour than traditional east Indian recipes ("easier on North American palates," says Kanji).

As the company's success grew, Kanji realized she had to move production into a commercial site. Kanji tried to source out appropriate equipment that would address their production needs without compromising the quality for which the company was known. Unfortunately, nothing available in the Canadian market suited their requirements. Their answer: do-it-yourself ingenuity. Kanji's husband adapted existing food-processing equipment for their purposes. Kanji says that, because of the fresh herbs and vegetables used in their products, tweaking commercial equipment was the best way to assure their quality-control standards. "There really wasn't any equipment that met our needs," she says. "And we didn't want to compromise on quality."

That sentiment is the driving force behind Thumbs Up Foods and one that led them to the Food Processing Development Centre in Leduc. There, Kanji and her staff were able to access the assistance of Alberta Agriculture, Food and Rural Development (AAFRD) in their efforts to meet federal food licensing regulations. After the American border was temporarily closed in the wake of BSE in May, 2003, Kanji shelved her plans to export meat samosas to international markets, but continued to apply the stringent regulations she learned at the Food Processing Development Centre. That adherence to food quality has enabled Thumbs Up to place the Serenna product line in a variety of retail and commercial outlets, including Sunterra Market and numerous hotels and restaurants.

While their current production facility allows them to produce up to 4,000 roti per hour, even that impressive quantity is insufficient to allow Thumbs Up to fully exploit their export opportunities. As a result, Kanji plans on opening up a new production facility in the spring of 2006. Five times larger than the present one, it will allow Thumbs Up Foods to expand into eastern Canada and the United States. In addition, the expansion of the business allows Thumbs Up Foods to meet a burgeoning demand of individuals and families: ready meals that satisfy the dietary concerns, taste buds and time constraints. The company offers three different ready-made curry meals that, Kanji says, are all cholesterol-free and contain no artificial colours or flavours.

With Thumbs Up Foods constantly on the look-out for the most innovative ways of satisfying their customers, the company's healthy twist on old-world classics is being eaten up by an enthusiastic market.

Thumbs Up Foods Inc.

Year founded: 1996

Primary Service: manufacturing of Indian foods: roti, samosas and curries

Headquarters: Calgary

Number of Employees: 10

Key markets: Indian grocery stores and restaurants in Canada and the United States

Contact: Fauzia Kanji

Phone: 403-250-9558

E-mail: samosa@shaw.ca

Website: www.thumbsupfoods.com