

Where Italy meets Ukraine

Maker of cabbage rolls and pasta aims to grow lucrative niche firm.

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Alaudin Kanji, left, and his son, Hussein, are part of the family business at Troika Foods and Pasta Time in Sherwood Park.

Perhaps only in the multicultural mecca that is Canada could you find an Indian man from Africa running a company that specializes in the production of Ukrainian and Italian foods.

“Food doesn’t need a specific culture or background,” says Alaudin Kanji of Troika Foods and Pasta Time in Sherwood Park. “You make and serve quality food, and people will buy it.”

Indeed, what makes Kanji successful in the food business — he has increased sales 600 per cent since he took over Troika in 2005 — is not so much his knowledge of food itself, but of the kind of systems (from accounting to production) necessary to turn 5,000 pounds of cabbage a week

into 2.5 million rolls a year, a statistic that makes Troika the largest producer of handmade cabbage rolls in Alberta.

When he bought Troika, it had been a family business, but a death in that family meant things were winding down. Kanji, who is an accountant by trade, knew enough not to mess with the successful recipes in place. Shortly after he took over the business, the rival food business Cheemo stopped making cabbage rolls, opening up the market further for Troika.

With an attractive new, re-designed box for the cabbage rolls, and a new, \$250,000 automated cabbage-roll stuffer poised to launch production, Kanji sees nothing but growth for this sector of his business. He plans to look at new twists on the traditional cabbage roll and hopes to add buckwheat filling and sour cabbage to his line.

“We’ve cornered the cabbage roll market in Western Canada,” he says, noting that Troika products are available at Save-On-Foods, Sobeys and Safeway throughout B.C. and the Prairie provinces.

When Kanji came to Canada in 1979 as 24-year-old immigrant from Nairobi, he didn’t envision becoming an entrepreneur with 12 employees. Indeed, he felt fortunate to have moved from Toronto to finish his certified management accounting program in Calgary before getting a job with the provincial government in Edmonton, where he enjoyed a long run in finance and systems.

But as he approached retirement age, Kanji knew he was tired of working for somebody else and was keen to grow a venture to benefit himself and his family. (Kanji’s son, Hussein, 25, recently graduated from university and has joined the firm.)

Troika was Kanji’s entry point, but things really started to cook with the purchase of Pasta Time in 2010. Here was another firm that was winding down, and ripe for a fresh approach. With two food companies under his belt, Kanji went in search of a federally inspected plant (like gold in the food industry) to combine the operations, moving to a 7,500-square-foot production facility in Sherwood Park two years ago.

The Pasta Time products are impressive enough that several high-quality Italian eateries in Edmonton put them on the menu, and they are also sold to Calgary restaurants through Sysco. On the retail side, Pasta Time products — from butternut squash ravioli to four cheese tri-colour tortellini to gnocchi — are carried at Edmonton’s Italian Centre, along with several Pasta Time sauces, including alfredo and Bolognese. The Italian Bakery in Edmonton also carries a limited selection of pasta and sauces.

“It’s an exciting business,” Kanji says. “Every day I get up, I look forward to coming to this place. We’re got a niche here. The money is not the motivation. It’s how do we grow this so everyone understands what we produce?” Kanji says that while many consumers are beguiled by the “fresh” promise of the mass-produced pasta found in those semi-solid plastic packages in the

deli section of the grocery store, he considers Pasta Time to be a superior product. Because it is frozen within about 15 minutes of being freshly made, the product doesn't require preservatives and it lasts in the freezer for up to a year.

Kanji is particularly excited about the Pasta Time gnocchi, the only gnocchi made in Alberta. It has only four ingredients — salt, eggs, flour, and potatoes. (The latter three products are Alberta-grown or -raised.) The pillowy soft nuggets cook in 12 to 14 minutes and, along with a sauce, are a hearty and delicious main course for busy individuals and families.

Sales of Troika Foods were \$250,000 a year when Kanji took over the business. With the addition of Pasta Time, and new systems to increase production, that figure has risen to \$1.5 million in yearly sales. Kanji expects the new cabbage-roll-stuffing machine to help them meet increasing demand for the product by pushing cabbage roll volume by 30 to 40 per cent.

Another of Kanji's goals is to have Pasta Time carried in more retail settings.

Kanji exudes pride in Pasta Time and Troika, and his son, Hussein, says teasingly that his father has to be coaxed to leave the plant at the end of the day. "This has been a very interesting business for us," says Kanji with a gigantic smile.

Find out more about Kanji's company at troikafoods.com.