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BAKERY. CAKE. CHOCOLATE. PASTRY

THE INTERNATIONAL ISSUE:

Global trends from Sirha

RUBICON BAKERS

Baking a better world

BREAD FLOUR BLENDS

Josey Baker Bread

PASTRY HYBRIDS 2.0

Innovations in croissants



REVOL

Coupe du Monde
de la Pâtisserie
SIRHA SPIRT

2019
30
YEARS

THE INTERNATIONAL ISSUE:

baking a better world

A recent visit to the San Francisco Bay Area provided me with a firsthand look at a wonderful story of inspiration, serving as a reminder of how the baking industry can play an influential role in making a positive impact on local communities.

Rubicon Bakers was founded in the Bay Area in 1993 as a job training facility for Rubicon Programs, a non-profit whose mission is to transform communities by equipping people to break the cycle of poverty. Now with more than 200 full-time employees, Rubicon Bakers is a thriving for-profit, social-mission business that carries on the original mission of Rubicon Programs. The wholesale bakery supplies cupcakes and cakes made with natural ingredients to leading grocery chains such as Whole Foods Market.

Many people that come to Rubicon Bakers have been incarcerated, homeless or are recently recovered from substance abuse. "We believe everyone deserves the same chance to succeed and thrive," owners Andrew Stoloff and Leslie Cray say.

Rubicon Bakers works directly with community partners like Rubicon Programs, The Bread Project, Lao Family Community & Development Center, Oakland Private Industry Council, Center for Employment Opportunities and San Quentin State Prison. The Richmond, California-based company is a Certified B Corporation, using its business as a force for good. The bakery donates more than 10% of its profits annually to local organizations working to support the community.

Rubicon Bakers gives each employee the opportunity to thrive, including health benefits, paid vacation, sick leave and advancement opportunities. The bakery goes so far as to provide interest-free loans to employees when they need a little extra help. Over the years, the company has loaned more than \$500,000 to its employees. "We have been able to grow profitably by hiring people who other businesses don't want to hire," Stoloff says. "We wind up with employees who are much more dedicated and focused on doing a good job here. We care about who the person is now."

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BETTER WORLD

At Rubicon Bakers, the mission revolves around giving employees a second chance.

BY JOHN UNREIN

When Andrew Stoloff and wife Leslie Crary bought Rubicon Bakers in the fall 2009, the wholesale bakery had just 14 part-time employees. Previously, Stoloff had owned restaurants and originally was brought in to try to sell the business. Instead, he fell in love.

“I looked at the financials, and it was pretty clear what they were spending on labor and ingredients was too high,” says Stoloff, who holds an MBA in finance from The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania. “At the time, I fell in love with the mission and how the bakery had touched people’s lives.”

From its inception, Rubicon Bakers, based in Richmond, California, has been committed to turning the lives of their workers around with every cake, cupcake, cookie and muffin they bake. Founded in 1993, the company helps rebuild lives by employing, training and supporting people who need a second chance in life.

Many employees come from life on the streets or prison or are recently recovered from substance abuse.

Once Stoloff and Crary, a lawyer who once worked as a public defender in New York, learned more about the opportunity to further the cause, they were in. There were no compelling offers to buy the bakery. Stoloff saw the chance to turn the business around. He went to the original employees and told them: Nobody is going to lose their job to a more efficient process. “We were going to work to provide them with a career path. Of the 14 original employees, half are still here today. One is a shift manager. One is a purchasing manager. One is a production manager.”

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“We have been able to grow profitably by hiring people who other businesses don’t want to hire,” Stoloff says. “We wind up with employees who are much more dedicated and focused on doing a good job here. We don’t do background checks or ask about the past mistakes someone might have made; we care about who the person is now. When everyone has the opportunity to participate fully in both the economy and their community, we all benefit.”

A natural evolution

More than just a bakery, Rubicon Bakers is spreading compassion to build a strong and empowered community. Now employing more than 200 bakers, Rubicon Bakers makes all-natural cakes, cupcakes, cookies and muffins. With a product line of more than 50 SKUs available in 2,500 retail locations nationwide, Rubicon Bakers is working every day to “Bake a Better World.”

This commitment extends to the ingredients in their baked products. The bakery never uses artificial colors, flavors or preservatives. For example, colors are made from vegetables. The cool green icing of Mint Chocolate Chip Cupcake uses color made from red cabbage and turmeric, and the deep red of Red Velvet Cupcakes is made from radishes. “Making red velvet cake with natural colors is no easy task,” Stoloff explains. “We go to great lengths to find the natural alternative.” They also use cage-free eggs, non-GMO expeller-pressed canola oil, unbleached flour, cane sugar, cocoa powder and butter.

All products are baked under one roof and made from scratch. Every single treat is finished by hand. It is the improved efficiency and strict attention to detail that

has helped the business grow by leaps and bounds. Rubicon Bakers branded products are sold in many grocery stores and specialty chains nationwide. These include Whole Food Market, Kroger, Safeway, Natural Grocers, Sprouts and other grocers.

Building efficiency

Two years ago, the owners implemented an Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP) system that touches every aspect of business: ingredient ordering, billing, inventory, tracking and more. Every ingredient package is assigned an internal-lot number and barcode to track it through the warehouse. Rubicon receives weekly truckload shipments of whole ingredients.

“It allows us to know in much more real time where we stand financially at any moment,” Crary says.

In the production facility, every ingredient is measured and portioned in bags to ensure recipes are followed to exacting standards. Everything gets a lot code and goes through X-ray and metal detection.

When the owners bought the place, there were two mixers, two ovens and not a single conveyor belt. Now there are eight Baxter rotating rack ovens, Hinds-Bock cake depositing machines, Unifiller Cake-O-Matic cake icing and decorating machines, Mettler Toledo weigh scales and metal detectors. On order is a new Italian 400-liter mixer that will weigh out oil and water automatically for each recipe.

“We can do 60 pans a minute when the depositor line is going full speed,” Stoloff says. “Usually we do one flavor at a time in one day. Today is chocolate day. We are making our most popular product: Chocolate Delight Cupcakes.”

Overall, the production facility will go through about 200 (140-quart) bowls per day. During holidays, the bakery runs three shifts a day. One customized production line — including Unifiller and FoodTools equipment — enables workers to pipe icing hearts and lines by hand while the machinery handles the filling and topping process. This is the type of semi-automation that Rubicon Bakers prides itself on, by integrating automation to improve efficiency and human touch points to offer creative customization.



“There is a human touch at every point in the production line.”

Andrew Stoloff, co-owner of Rubicon Bakers

“We have automated the easy stuff and kept the harder decoration work for the hand work,” he says. “We were able to speed production up by automating this portion (filling and topping) and now we have four people at the end of the line decorating by hand.”

Rubicon Bakers recently launched a new addition to the flavor line with Vegan Neapolitan Cupcakes. With a suggested retail price of \$5.99, the new 4-pack Vegan Neapolitan Cupcakes is made with chocolate cake filled with whipped vanilla creme, topped with sweet strawberry icing and mini chocolate chips. These cupcakes are scratch-made from plant-based ingredients, including vegan sugar, chocolate chips, vanilla and non-GMO expeller-pressed canola oil. The Kosher-certified Vegan Neapolitan Cupcakes are available at Sprouts Farmers Market, select Whole Foods Market locations and independent retailers nationwide.

“We don’t control the growth. We are in business to say yes to our customers,” Stoloff says. “Cupcakes are our most widely distributed product. We are in all but two regions of Whole Foods. Originally, the idea for cupcakes in a four-pack came from Whole Foods. Now we have introduced vegan cupcakes and cakes, which have been very well received in the mainstream market.”

Maintaining human touch points

What is interesting is the role that Whole Foods has played since the beginning. At one time, Rubicon Bakers made hand-made marshmallows. “That was the product that got us into Whole Foods,” Stoloff

says. Since then, Rubicon Bakers converted to exclusively making sweet bakery products like cupcakes. Automation has helped improved efficiency.

“When we started, every cupcake was scooped and decorated by hand,” he says. “We have streamlined and automated to a point that we are still a bakery and not a factory. We have nine people on the cupcake line who are filling and icing, decorating and putting them in the box. There is a human touch at every point in the production line. As we got better at making cupcakes, people noticed, and our business grew.”

Rubicon Bakers boasts an experienced staff. Catherine Trujillo brings tremendous bakery experience to Rubicon Bakers as vice president of marketing and sales. Previously, she was global bakery project coordinator for Whole Foods Market, directing bakery business development and strategy.

Rubicon Bakers is a Certified B Corporation, which means the company has made an environmental and social commitment to use the business as a force for good. The bakery was originally founded as a job training program for Rubicon Programs, a Richmond-based nonprofit organization committed to transforming East Bay communities by equipping people to break the cycle of poverty. Today, running the bakery as a for-profit business enables the owners to give back more to the populations they serve. By focusing on efficiency, employee retention and product quality, the bakery has expanded dramatically in the past decade. [B](#)