

# Martin's new visitors center: The story of how a locally made potato roll became famous

*By MARCUS RAUHUT*

CHAMBERSBURG - Inside the new visitors' center at Martin's Famous Pastry Shoppe in Chambersburg is a glimpse into how it all started.

There's the garage that Lloyd and Lois Martin converted into a bakery to start their business.

Then there's the 1954 Dodge Coronet that they stuffed with baked goods and took to market.

The business that grew out of a garage on Edgar Avenue today employs more than 500 people and makes the No. 1 branded roll in the country, sought after by celebrity chefs and sold up and down the East Coast and internationally.

"The main thing about the museum is you can see where we came from to where we are today," said Julie Martin, social media manager and part of the third generation in the family business.

When her grandparents started their baking business, they drove to farmers markets in Camp Hill, Carlisle and Harrisburg because they didn't want to compete with Lois' parents, who had their own bakery. They took out the back seat of the car so they could stack doughnuts, cookies, bread and other products.

The small operation established in 1955 later grew into a restaurant/bakery on Lincoln Way East.

When supermarkets replaced the corner store, Martin's saw an opportunity to sell to a mass market and opened a larger plant off of Wayne Road in the late 1970s.

Jim Martin, part of the second generation and now company president, also saw an opportunity to focus on rolls and bread.

"Dad saw a lot of people were making pastries. I still remember them - they were awesome - but dad did see that the potato roll and potato bread was something no one else did," Julie Martin said. "We narrowed it down from more than 100 products to about 10."

With those products, Martin's developed a niche, along with a devout following.

When Bobby Flay appeared on "Jimmy Kimmel Live" in February, he used Martin's potato rolls for his burger. Wolfgang Puck had Martin's products shipped by FedEx for banquets.

"We've gone to Food Network shows. It's interesting - when Jim Martin shows up, he's the celebrity. The celebrity chefs seek him out. Many of them are loyal customers," said Scott Heintzelman, vice president, finance and administration. "It's a feather in the cap, more than anything."

Social media has also helped build Martin's notoriety.

NBC's "Parks and Recreation" star Aziz Ansari gave the company a shout-out on Twitter, asking where he could find Martin's potato rolls in Los Angeles.

"People tweet us or ask on Facebook: 'When are you coming here?'" Julie Martin said. "We had someone tweet us the other week from France, asking us when we're coming there."

Though raves and requests like this are common, Heintzelman said the company manages growth carefully and wants to be sure it grows at the "right pace."

"Our capital is very patient. If you're a publicly traded company responding to investors every quarter, you hurry to respond to the numbers. Mr. Martin is very patient with capital, and you can do that as a family company," Heintzelman said.

The privately owned family company competes with some pretty big names.

The largest competitor is Grupo Bimbo, the Mexican conglomerate that makes Entenmann's, Sara Lee, Stroehmann, Thomas' English muffins and bagels, and other brands.

Despite the competition, Martin's has found success doing some things the old fashioned way.

In grocery stores, most companies pay "slotting fees" to place the products on the shelves.

"Our company has historically never done that," Heintzelman said. "Mr. Martin doesn't believe it. It's a slippery slope when you're buying shelf space. He's always believed the best business model is to have a superior product that people ask for by name."

He said most local residents don't realize how big of a footprint Martin's has: Twenty percent of the business comes from Florida. New York actually makes up the biggest state for sales. Products also reach the Caribbean.

Products are entering Europe and Turkey through an agreement with Shake Shack, a restaurant chain that has grown in the U.S. and is being franchised abroad.

Martin's employs more than 500 people and has plants in Chambersburg and Valdosta, Ga.

The Chambersburg plant - four times the size of Valdosta - is now in "phase eight" of expansion.

"The story about the Martins, I really believe, is an American-made, family-made business that bootstrapped itself in the 1950s to being the No. 1 branded roll in America. In spite of the huge success, the family remains very humble and very approachable," Heintzelman said. "It's always having an eye towards having a broader reach without losing our traditional values of who we are. It is a God-honoring company."

-----

Marcus Rauhut can be reached at [mrauhut@publicopinionnews.com](mailto:mrauhut@publicopinionnews.com) and 262-4752, or follow him on Twitter @MarcusRauhutPO.