

Trade Names

Contest's fine print sparked Gunther's Gourmet

Brothers run firm in Henrico that sells all-natural products

BY JOAN TUPPENCE
Special Correspondent

Chef Mike Lampros and his brother Nick first thought about starting a business in 1999 when Mike wanted to enter his popular orange balsamic vinaigrette in a contest.

"I read the fine print in the contest rules, and all the recipes became property of the contest," said Nick, a lawyer. "It struck me that Mike would lose control of his product. I suggested he not enter and instead look into bottling the product. That was basically the start of the company."

The two created Gunther's Gourmet Groceries LLC in 1999 as a part-time company for Mike, who was working full time as an executive chef for Reynolds Metals.

Their new business didn't sell the vinaigrette to stores until 2002.

After learning that stores preferred to sell a line of products rather than an individual one, the brothers developed a line of marinades and salad dressings and later added a line of salsas.

"People use the salsas more frequently than marinades and vinaigrettes," Mike said.

Gunther's Gourmet now manufactures and sells a variety of all-natural salsas, marinades and vinaigrettes. It

Gunther's Gourmet Groceries LLC

What is it? Manufactures all natural salsas, marinades and vinaigrettes

Employees: The two owners and contracted sales representatives, distributors and brokers

Owners: Mike and Nick Lampros

Location: 3530 Mayland Court

Contact: (804) 240-1796 or www.gunthersgourmet.com

added four new flavors of salsa, representing the company's hot and spicy line.

The company has sales in about 35 states and ships products nationally and internationally.

"At one point, we sold our products in the Pacific Northwest and Hawaii, but it wasn't cost-efficient," Mike said.

Sales are focused on stores east of the Mississippi and primarily along the East Coast. He is talking with grocery chains in Missouri, New York, Texas and California about adding Gunther's Gourmet products to their shelves.

The products are priced between \$3.99 and \$7.99 a bottle.

Since 2006 when Mike went full time with the company, sales have increased between 12 percent and 24 percent each year.

"It fluctuates by a great deal depending on the time of

year," Mike said. "We move between 10,000 and 24,000 units a month."

Ian Kirkland, owner of The Caboose Wine & Cheese shop in Ashland, loved Gunther's Gourmet products the first time he tried them.

"They do quite well for us," he said.

Gunther's Gourmet has won a variety of awards for its products as well as its packaging since its inception. For instance, it was a finalist in 2007 and earlier this year for the Muse award, given by the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts for creativity in business.

"Every item we sell has won at least two awards," Mike said.

The brothers got their first taste of the food industry in high school when they worked at a local deli in Roanoke.

After graduating from college, Nick went to law school and became a lawyer.

Mike graduated from the Culinary Institute of America in 1991 and became a certified executive chef in 1999. He worked for the Country Club of Virginia before becoming executive chef at Crestar Bank (now SunTrust) and later at Reynolds Metals and Stonewall Market.

Mike markets Gunther's Gourmet products through the company website and at retail shows such as Bizarre Bazaar and the Fancy Food Show in New York.

The salsas, marinades and vinaigrettes are manufactured in Maryland.



EVA RUSSO/TIMES-DISPATCH

Gunther's Gourmet is named after Mike Lampros' dog Gunther, who died in 2008. In the company showroom, Lampros gets a kiss from Ludwig, or Gunther II.

"We contract with them and they bottle it. We want to make sure it's done professionally," Mike said. "I go up there four or five times [after a new production of salsa or marinade is made] to make sure they are following the specs. I try a bottle of each of the products every time a pallet rolls in."

Last year, Mike moved the company from his home to office-warehouse space off Mayland Drive in western Henrico County.

"We needed a loading dock and lots of warehouse space," Mike said. "This is a good location. We have a lot of room to grow."

The company, which is

named after Mike's brindle boxer Gunther who died in 2008, offers a free online cookbook with more than 80 of Mike's recipes.

Tammy Oley, butcher at the Glen Allen Supermarket, which sells Gunther's Gourmet products, believes the salsas "are the best on the market today."