

Featured Story

It's More Than Food, It's A Business

By: Kelli B. Kavanaugh, 4/8/2010

Once regarded as a mere meat and potatoes mecca, Metro Detroit is experiencing a bit of a food renaissance. Local food producers like [Calder's Dairy](#) in Lincoln Park, [Great Lakes Coffee](#) in Bloomfield Hills, and Ann Arbor's Clancy's Fancy are making products that more and more consumers across the country are clamoring for.

Take Ferndale's [Garden Fresh](#), for instance. It is the nation's leading producer of all-natural salsa, with revenues approaching \$100 million a year, according to WWJ. The company produces 115,000 pounds of salsa a day and recently entered into an exclusive relationship with [Jimmy Buffet's Margaritaville](#) line on foods.



So yeah, speaking of potatoes, these ain't small ones we're talking about here.

But everyone starts somewhere. Metromode spoke with a few producers that, while not as big as Garden Fresh, are certainly growing, to learn how they were maximizing their products' availability locally, regionally, and even nationally.

The Veggie

Michelle Rastelli founded [Moo Moo's Vegetarian Cuisine](#) in 2005, first as a bistro in Grosse Pointe Park. Rastelli started getting interest from local markets, so she added fresh prepared foods to her repertoire. The company was growing, but limited by the products' relatively short (seven days) shelf life. After some experimentation, Rastelli decided to completely revamp her company, which is now based in Ferndale. She introduced a line of frozen vegetarian food in 2009. "No one else is really doing it," she says. "Now I can broaden distribution, see how far I can take it."

Moo Moo's products are attractively packaged, and the flavors are downright adventurous for frozen food: Poblano chickpea patties, sweet 'n' spicy curry tofu, roasted cashew stir fry, and chipotle black bean burrito, for example.

Currently, Moo Moo's is carried at Meijer, Shaw's Supermarkets on the east coast, Winn Dixie Grocery Stores (that's 600 markets nationwide), six Whole Foods regions and HEB in Texas. Locally, you can find Moo Moo's at [Hiller's](#), [Holiday Market](#), and [Arbor Farms](#), to name just a few places.



Rastelli says that building relationships with the right distributors has been key to her success. "You want to make sure you are going to the correct distributors that can handle your product," she says. "The product will just sit there if they are not doing the things they should be for you." This fall, she plans to launch a national "Moo Moo's on Campus" initiative, bringing her frozen dishes to colleges and universities and introducing six new products.

Her advice for the kitchen gourmand looking to grow into a viable business? "Like anything else it's a business, even though it's food-related you're still dealing with the same things. It's important to get to know people in the business. I've had a lot of great mentors along the way."

The Pickler

The popularity of [McClure's Pickles](#) can be attributed to two things: A killer family recipe and press coverage that most small businesses would kill for.

Founded in 2006 and already the recipient of glowing write-ups in The New York Times and Martha Stewart Living as well as appearances on The Food Network, these pickles have big fans.



One distinct strategic advantage that McClure's possesses that most start-ups do not is a multi-city presence. With one McClure brother, Joe, based in Southeast Michigan and another, Bob, based in New York City, their production and sales bases are double what most companies have at their start.

"Always nice to know the area, keep things local," says Joe, explaining why their produce is sourced from Upstate New York, Connecticut, and New Jersey for their New York production facility, and from Michigan, Ontario and Ohio for the one in Troy.

Whereas Moo Moo's national distribution requires Rastelli to work with distributors she knows and trusts, the brothers McClure are at the level of sales where they are their own middle man. "We have a personal connection with every store where [you can find our pickles]," says Joe. "It does make a difference when [the store owner] knows the owner and not the distributor."

Currently, the geographic range in which McClure's Pickles can be found allows this level of personal service. But Joe acknowledges that, for example, weekly trips to Chicago would be impractical, so things could change when sales increase in that market.

"When it gets to that point, we will reexamine things I think," Joe explains. "We have a couple of small distributors in New York and we are slowly working on getting wider distribution."

The McClure's method is simple: They drop samples off at a store and follow up a week later. If the store owner likes the product, then McClure's Pickles will start to appear on the market's shelves. "We're not pushy," he adds.

The approach seems to be working. McClure's can be found at Eastern Market and Pure Detroit in Detroit, at Holiday, [Plum](#), and [Westborn Markets](#) in the metro region, and the People's Food Co-op and [Produce Station](#) in Ann Arbor.

Customers have been known to urge a store to add the product, something that Joe says is a big help. "It's always better coming from a customer rather than a salesperson," he says. "But we wouldn't get anywhere if we couldn't stand behind the product and it wasn't good -- I'm glad my grandma passed down the recipe!"

The Newbie

Suzanne Vier and college buddy Randy TenBrink founded [Randy's Granola](#) barely a year ago, in May 2009. Visiting home from New York City, where she was then living, Vier tasted some of TenBrink's granola and had what she calls her "A-ha!" moment. Burned out on the corporate life, she saw starting a company as a reason to move back to Grand Rapids...and a way to fully delve into her love of food. This spring, Vier relocated her new company to Detroit after being around the town's food entrepreneurs and realizing "that there are a lot of dynamic and exciting things happening in Detroit."

Randy's Granola is hand-crafted, all-natural, gluten free, vegan, and whole grain, and is currently available in three flavors: Original, So Very Cherry and Lotsa Chocolate. It can be found every Saturday at Eastern Market, at a handful of independent retailers in Detroit, as well as [Papa Joe's](#), [Randazzo's](#) and Holiday, Hollywood, and Westborn Markets -- a total of 60 stores across the state. It also reaches into Ohio and New York City.



Vier describes Randy's current style of distribution as "a hybrid between McClure's and Moo Moo's" -- demonstrating the collegial relationship that can be found in the local foodie world. "When we first started -- and we're not even a year old -- I did all the distribution myself," says Vier. "I loaded up the granola-mobile from the warehouse, drove it to stores, carrying the product directly into the stores. It was very personal."

Rapid growth forced some reckoning and Vier turned to her peers for advice about different distributors. She chose Carmela, a statewide operation that works primarily with specialty markets, Vier's target audience.

"For me, it was a win-win," she says, although she acknowledges that no large gain can be had without a tinge of growing pains. "When you switch to distributors you lose some control of the process, but at the same time you gain reach."

Vier estimates that Carmela's now handles 90 percent of the company's distribution, and she is now in talks with other companies to extend her product's reach throughout the Midwest and East Coast.

"We always wanted to be a national company, so we built into our product that ability to work with distributors. But it's not easy," she explains. "I'm still learning about distributors but, at the end of the day, it's still a business partnership."

Kelli B. Kavanaugh is the development news editor at Model D, Metromode's Green Space writer and the woman behind [Wheelhouse Detroit](#).

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Photos:

McClure's Pickles
Michelle Restalli, founder of Moo Moo's vegetarian cuisine
Moo Moo's vegetarian, in the frozen section

Joe McClure
Randy's Granola