

Gagné Foods sees continued success

By Alex Lear

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Company's award-winning biscuits rise to meet demand

BATH – When he opened the Robinhood Free Meetinghouse in Georgetown 13 years ago, Michael Gagné's evolving biscuit business was intended to brand his restaurant. An off-season operation at best.

“That was the misguided purpose,” Gagné said last Friday at his food service plant on Wingfarm Parkway in Bath, where he churns out roughly 250,000 biscuits a week and from which he ships his award-winning products all over the country, meeting orders for more than 500 specialty stores and high-profile markets.

“It's like the biscuits have become a way bigger business than the restaurant, potentially,” he said.

From Metropolitan Markets in Seattle, to Treasure Island Foods in greater Chicago, Kowalski's venues in Minnesota, Harris Teeter's supermarkets in the South, Gagné Foods biscuits are hitting the shelves, and they also grace the pages of catalogs and online vendors such as Stonewall Kitchen, Saks Fifth Avenue, Mackenzie Ltd. and Dean & DeLuca, while Mainefoodie.com, American Spoon Foods and Smithfield Marketplace of Virginia are due to distribute the products.

Gagné's biscuits come in three varieties. There is the 72 Layer Cream Cheese Biscuit, which earned the 2006 Gold Award for Outstanding Baked Goods from the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade. A variation on that treat is the Five Herb Parmesan 72 Layer Cream Cheese Biscuit, which includes fresh basil, oregano, marjoram, parsley and thyme and reggiano parmesan. There is also the 72 Layer Cream Cheese Cinnamon Roll, which is served with the same dough as the biscuits but also rolled with a mixture of cinnamon and sugar.

“We know we'll need to expand our line to pick up brokerages and more shelf space in retail,” Gagné said.

Expansion has been the name of the game for Gagné Foods, particularly with the opening in January of its plant. The roughly 10,000-square-foot space, located in part of the former R.M. Tate warehouse, was converted from mass storage space to a food service facility in just nine weeks, Gagné said. It is a far cry from the approximately 10-by-20-foot room in the Robinhood Free Meetinghouse where up until last year Gagné and his staff were hurriedly making biscuits to meet the ever-rising demand.

Birth of a biscuit

Gagné, 54, opened the restaurant in 1994 following a life spent primarily in the culinary business. Forty years ago he was washing dishes in Old Orchard Beach, and he put himself through college working in restaurants. The burgeoning cook became a head chef, working his taste-titillating talent at prominent restaurants and inns throughout Maine before hopping on board a yacht owned by the four-star La Costa Country Club of California for a tour of the Caribbean.



Michael Gagné, in back, expanded his Gagné Foods business to a plant in Bath almost a year ago. His staff includes marketing coordinator Jenna Friedman, left, and his daughter Somerset, who serves as national sales director.

Gagné became spa chef at the resort before taking his trade to the Red Fox Tavern in Middleburg, Va., where he served as executive chef. During Gagné's seven years there he tripled food sales while designing and building a new kitchen. It was also during that time that the earliest carnation of the 72 Layer Cream Cheese Biscuit was born.

Next up was the Osprey Restaurant in Georgetown, where Gagné increased sales by 750 percent as chef/manager by the time he opened his own establishment. The Robinhood Free Meetinghouse – named after the area of Georgetown where it is located – opened in a post-and-beam church built in the mid-1850s and since restored.

In the time that Gagné Foods has been in operation, sales have gone from \$800 in Year One to an expected \$1 million in Year Five. “We hope to hit \$6 million next year,” Gagné said.

While the product has been a tremendous success, the chef is quick to point out that he's not exactly laughing all the way to the bank. He may own a five-star restaurant and make nationally known products, but he's still driving a used car.

“The investment has been huge,” Gagné said. “I started the Meetinghouse with \$3,000 and now I owe \$3 million ... that's a success story.”

Tongue and cheek aside, if reviews in the media are any reflection of the success of Gagné's biscuits, then raves in the Boston Globe, Down East magazine, TASTE of the Seacoast, the Portland Press Herald and other publications are important testaments.

The National Association for the Specialty Food Trade award ceremony in New York City last year also added to the growing public perception that the 72-layer biscuit was a culinary force to be reckoned with.

Likening himself a “little country boy in Maine” compared to his biscuit's competition in the Big Apple, Gagné said, “at the show I felt like a virgin in a brothel.”

Still, he added, “we walked away with the little gold guy.”

Last month the plant received an “excellent” rating after an inspection by the American Institute of Baking. That rating – a standard in the industry – secures Gagné Foods' ability to reach the customers of major larger distributors, such as Costco.

“We've never seen a mouse in this operation,” Gagné said. “But it cost \$30,000 in mouse protection just to be compliant on the federal level.”

He mused that all seven ingredients in his basic cream cheese biscuit are natural, making his product accessible to the all-natural market despite its fat content.

“It never occurred to me,” Gagné said, “that a 250-calorie biscuit would ever appeal to the health food community.”

A significant number of the approximately 30-person staff at Gagné's busy plant is at-risk youth. “They're all good kids in a little trouble,” he said. “A lot of the kids not only need to know how to do a job, but how to have a job.”

“If you're a hard worker you have a place here,” said Somerset Gagné, Michael Gagné's 26-year-old daughter and one of several family members who work with him. She worked in the restaurant in high school as a dishwasher and waitress and said it never occurred to her at that time just how popular her dad's biscuits would become.

She serves as national sales director for Gagné Foods. Michael Gagné's father, Rene, is the business's CFO – “chief financial offerer,” Gagné said – while his brother David is plant engineer. Other close friends of the family, such as accountant Neil Dickinson, marketing coordinator Jenna Friedman and shipping and sales manager Mollie Reed lend their services to the operation.

The recent years have proven a roller coaster ride for Gagné, and he sees two ways out: either he sells the business, or he retires and hands it off to his children. Having built the business to secure his retirement and provide for his family and employees, it's pretty clear that he prefers the latter option.

“It could be a legacy,” Gagné said.