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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL JAMES BROWN

# ENTREPRENEUR

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**Molinaro's Foods Ltd. has been able to maintain its high standing in the industry because its family management insists on employing a philosophy that appeals to the public: It uses fresh product to create nutritional and delicious meals, and it listens to what its customers have to say.**

**T**he Molinaro family knows pizza. For more than 40 years, Mississauga, Ont.-based Molinaro's Foods Ltd. has built an ever-expanding manufacturing business based on par-baked pizza shells and fresh "fully topped" pizza products.

Let's say Gino Molinaro, the chief executive officer, 66, a baker by trade who emigrated to Canada in his early teens, the company started out primarily as a supplier of pizza shells and components (meats, cheese, pepperoni and vegetables). These were eagerly sought after by the food service sector, including the restaurants and snack bars that populated the burgeoning hospitality trade of the 1960s to 1970s.

During this period, Gino Molinaro was only a small portion of the company's products — fresh topped and whole wrapped pizzas, manufactured as private label products — were destined for supermarkets.

In contrast, today more than 90% of Molinaro's product is destined for supermarkets at private label products, says company president Vince Molinaro, 40. He and his brother Frank, 36, an operations consultant, represent the second generation of Molinaros to bring their energy and enthusiasm to the highly successful enterprise.

In fact, in the past several decades, the appetite of consumers for purchasing fresh pizza at their supermarket has skyrocketed. Pizza is growing in popularity among virtually every socio-economic and demographic group in North America, says Vince Molinaro.

"Pizza may well be the No. 1 food in North America," says Gino Molinaro, whose products are mainstays in supermarket chains and big box stores.

"Customers appreciate pizza as a food product that's so easy to make; they just put heat and serve it. It's delicious, convenient and provides valuable nutrients, proteins and starches. It's fast and easy, except with a salad, for example, makes complete dinner for a family."

For the company's success to be sustained, says Gino Molinaro, it's important to concentrate on the products it knows best, the Molinaros say.

While many manufacturers get sidetracked by producing products well outside their core expertise, Molinaro's limits its new product diversification to items that naturally complement its pizza lines.

These include, for example, pizza sauces and components (toppings) packed into a package with pizza shells for consumers to assemble themselves, dough balls, the so-called hand-made calzones, frozen filled pastas that include ravioli, tortellini or gnocchi, and specialty flatbreads such as gourmet focaccia.

Yet, because pizza is such a growth market — Vince Molinaro estimates a growth rate of 10% to 15% a year — the pizza market is also becoming a competitive one. At the same time, consumer tastes are becoming more sophisticated and varied.

"The market is always changing," says Gino Molinaro, noting that the company works hard to be the market leader in anticipating trends. This is backed up by the company's dedicated and knowledgeable sales team, management and employees.

In the past decade, for example, consumers have embraced a variety of styles of pizza crusts, whole wheat, thin and ready-crisp. For example, "Our company anticipated the emerging market appetite for multi-grain crusts," Gino Molinaro says. "Recently, we placed an emphasis on new varieties and experiments for the organic pizza market."

Building on its strengths has allowed Molinaro's to gain market share in the private label sector. "What really distinguishes us is our high-quality products, flexibility and responsiveness. In-house production development capabilities and our speed to market," Vince Molinaro says.

"We are flexible enough to accommodate a small run of, for example, 50 cases, yet we also have the capacity to manufacture



**Gino Molinaro, left, and son Vince say the family-owned company has stayed on top in the competitive food industry by actively keeping track of new trends in the business.**

1,000 or 2,000 cases of pizza along with other products, in a single day," he adds.

Gino Molinaro also notes that the company is continuously looking for ways to improve its equipment to stay competitive and facilitate new product development.

"While some ideas for new types of pizzas come directly from their customers, the company also comes up with new selections and then presents them for taste tests. Still, privacy and discretion are also key reasons Molinaro's longevity and good reputation in the marketplace, Gino Molinaro says. Pizzas are custom made, the company never duplicates a product from one customer to the next, and each formula is unique to each client.

"Clients trust me; there is a great deal of mutual respect between our clients and our company," Gino Molinaro says with pride. "We really appreciate the ongoing support we receive from our clients."

The company is currently introducing pizza and related products under its own Molinaro brand into its clients' retail outlets.

"We are becoming more aggressive in promoting Molinaro-branded products," says Vince Molinaro. But he makes it clear: "We're working with our retail clients on this initiative, with strategies that include providing customer discount coupons in the stores and in-store contests such as a trip for two to Italy. We're supporting this campaign by running radio commercials promoting our brand."

Clearly, the family's forward-looking strategies for growth are working in their favour. During the past 10 years, sales have tripled. This year, Molinaro's is experiencing a whopping 10% increase in revenue, its most explosive sales growth ever.

From humble beginnings in a 2,000-square-foot facility back in the 1970s, the company operates in a 500,000-sq-ft facility with the most up-to-date technology. Plans are underway to increase its space, once again, over the next calendar year.

"Quality is our family tradition," is the company's motto. Given the company's continuous growth throughout the decades and its reputation for high-quality products, it seems the market agrees with that statement.

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Head office: Mississauga, Ont.  
Business sector: Food  
Market: International  
Number of Employees: 150  
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