



Pasta by Hand

By Annette Kingsbury
Photographs By Lisa Dunlap

The neighborhood at Culver and Marcus on Detroit's east side shows the wear and tear of years of economic depression including boarded up houses and vacant lots. But inside the yellow brick building on the corner, it might as well be 1940. Tiny Eden Organic Pasta employs 11 people in the same building where noodles have been made since 1923. The interior design and the Italian pasta-making machines have barely changed over the decades. One noodle-cutting machine from the 1940s is the only one left working in the country.

Assistant General Manager Rosanne Swaney has worked in the building off and on since 1976. She even met her husband Steve here. She worked her way up from part-time secretary, knows every inch of the building and likes things just the way they are. "There are ways we could sell more, but you'd have to compromise, and we don't do that," she says.

A division of Clinton, Michigan-based Eden Foods, Eden Organic Pasta makes all-natural, organic pastas using traditional, small-batch methods. Originally named the Schmidt Noodle Company, the business was started by a German couple, Theodore and Wilhelmina Schmidt. Their homemade egg noodles were so popular among family



and friends that they decided to go into business. They ended up selling their noodles to restaurants in Frankenmuth and to the Bill Knapp chain.

Eden Foods, which got its start as an Ann Arbor food co-op in the 1960s, purchased the Schmidt Noodle Company in 1982. There has never been any thought of moving, Swaney said. “This is sort of a landmark,” she explains. “Part of, we think, the charm in what we do is the older, slow process. You can’t walk in here, for example, and push a button and make pasta.”

The process starts with huge bags of organic flour and ends with packaging, where some labels are still applied by hand. In big, modern factories the pasta may never have human contact. Here, “It’s almost treated like a baby,” Swaney explains. “It’s hand-done all the way.”

No more than a week’s worth of flour is ordered at one time so the raw materials are always fresh. The same is true for spices. The flour goes into a huge sifter via an overhead pipe, then to an equally large bowl where it’s mixed with water. After mixing, various sizes and shapes of pasta are extruded through brass dies, everything from tiny alphabet noodles to thin spaghetti. Wide flat pasta ribbons are folded over and over into layers and cut.

In the old days, the windows were opened to allow the pasta to dry. Today, after an initial machine drying, the finished products are air-dried overnight in a warm room, except for spaghetti, which takes an entire weekend. “If we were new, we’d be set up completely differently,”

Swaney says. Some pasta companies use Teflon dies, rather than the antique brass ones Eden uses. They’d be impossibly costly now. Swaney says that Teflon dies yield “plastic pasta” that doesn’t hold sauce as well: “Ours is the rough texture.”

Eden pastas are made of organic ingredients, including some nonhybrid varieties of wheat like Kamut and spelt. The company buys grain directly from farmers, not through brokers. “Our farmers are very, very important to us,” Swaney says. “Without the good grain, I cannot make the good pasta.”

The relationship is important to the farmers, too. Jeff Booms—who with his brother owns a 900-acre, third-generation farm in Minden City—first sold beans to Eden for canning. Now he also grows spelt for the pastas. “We’ve been working with Eden for probably over 15 years now,” he says. “They really want to work directly with the farmers. They’re coming up with new things to expand their line, and they also come up with things we can use on a rotational basis [because] we can’t grow beans every year.”

The close working relationship can lead to surprising results. One year, when a farmer’s wheat crop was ruined by wet weather, he called Eden. “He said, ‘I had a bad year, but I have some of this organic rye I’ve been growing. Do you have any interest in rye?’” explains company spokesperson Sue Potter. The result was a new product: rye pasta spirals.

Eden visits each farmer annually. “They’re visiting all over the world,

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making sure that what we’re getting is what we’re told we’re getting,” Swaney says. “That is one of the things I’m so impressed with about our management. We do what we say we do.”

Eden uses spelt and Kamut (a trademarked brand of American khorasan wheat), as well as durum wheat, semolina, rye, brown rice, buckwheat and quinoa to make a total of 25 shapes, colors and flavors of pasta. They are packaged in different colors of boxes to signify their content: gold boxes are 100% whole grain; blue boxes 60%; green boxes contain no whole grain.

In 2009, Eden Foods was selected the best food company in the world by the Better World Shopping Guide. Eden Organic Pasta was the first food production facility in North America to be certified organic by a third party. Its facilities have also received superior ratings from AIB, a food-safety organization.

All that goodness comes from an antique of a building in a neighborhood that has seen better days. “You can do things the right way; it may be the hard way,” Potter says. “If you want cheap food, we don’t have that.” 

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