

## Sandella's blazes own trail, in part with high-tech kitchens

By James Scarpa

**WEST REDDING, Conn. (Aug. 19, 2008)** No one can accuse Mike Stimola of being a "me-too" restaurant operator, or Sandella's Flatbread, his fast-casual concept, of following the crowd in terms of kitchen equipment, menu or business model.

In 1994, when Stimola founded Sandella's, now a 125-unit chain based here, he was a restaurant newbie with a fresh outlook on foodservice. For one thing, the former owner of a design and construction company staked his concept on flatbread, an age-old staple of various cultures but hardly an item familiar to Americans. For another, he explored operations approaches that were unusual at the time but commonplace today, such as purchasing manufactured food items rather than cooking from scratch and swapping conventional commercial cooking equipment for speedier and easier-to-use high-tech cooking gear. Thanks largely to the appeal of Sandella's simplified operations and relatively low development cost of about [REDACTED], Stimola, who now holds the title of president of the company, has sold development rights to more than 400 stores since he began franchising in early 2007.

But to get on the fast track, Stimola had to rethink how to do business. "When I opened, my stores always looked good and I made good sales volumes," he said. "But I had consistency issues and complexity issues."

Early on, Stimola realized it was more practical to have his signature flatbreads made in volume by a bakery, rather than attempt them in multiple kitchens. The thin, pliable rounds, similar to Middle Eastern lavash, are the platforms for core menu items like grilled flatbread pizzas, paninis, wraps and quesadillas.

However, there was still plenty of food prep in the stores. Each kitchen cooked chicken, sliced meats and chopped vegetables, hardly a recipe for consistency or cost control. Over time, Stimola was able to source prepared proteins and precut produce to reduce the burden on operators.

"The simplicity of the equipment in our stores today has a lot to do with the sophistication of food prepared outside the stores," said Stimola. "When I started, you could not buy precooked, presliced breast meat of chicken. Today, you can buy that product anywhere and with really high quality."

Farming out the food prep not only saved labor, but allowed Sandella's to streamline the kitchen. Stimola found that he could get by without slicers and prep sinks and with fewer ovens.

Sandella's most significant equipment event was the switch in recent years from conveyor ovens to high-speed ovens for hot items like flatbread pizzas and panini. It was a major advance in simplifying operations, increasing speed of service and reducing utility and labor costs.

The high-speed oven is "the neatest piece of equipment we have," in Stimola's words.

"Everything we do is cooked in that oven." It's a sophisticated yet easy-to-use device that fits on the countertop. It uses a combination of high-speed heated air, infrared radiant heat and microwaves to cook with remarkable quickness. "Things that used to take a minute and a half in the conveyor oven take 30 seconds in this," said Stimola. "It has allowed us to really fine tune the quality of what we make, rather than put items on a conveyor oven where everything comes out at the same time." Each store has one or two units depending on its volume of business.

With a list price [REDACTED] the high-speed oven costs about [REDACTED] more than a conveyor oven, but it brings its own economies. For example, an on-board catalytic converter removes grease emissions and makes a ventilation hood unnecessary, saving as much as [REDACTED]. In addition, because the units do not continually emit heat like conveyor ovens, the air conditioning load and utility bills are lower. Moreover, they help Sandella's keep up its speed of service and store volume, which can run from [REDACTED]

Futhermore, the ovens are programmable, so that every menu item is cooked to the same specs chainwide. "You just press the button for, say, Chicken Delicato Panini," said Stimola. Each oven in the system is programmed with a computer card sent by the corporate office.

As a result of the equipment evolution, Stimola reckons that the cost of new-store equipment has actually dropped by half since the mid-1990s. "The equipment we use for cooking, storage and the front-of-the-house is probably about [REDACTED]," said Stimola. "In the old days, we were probably spending about [REDACTED], in today's dollars."

"I think what is unique about our stores is that we don't have proprietary stuff," added Stimola. "We're just leveraging what people today do out there in technology and manufacturing."

*\* Please reference Sandella's Flatbread UFDD for financial information.*