

Via Oliveto takes leap from racks to tunnel oven

Reading Bakery Systems helps small Canadian bakery position
"Pasquale's Glorious Flatbread" for wider success





Pasquale Zappia and his sons Patrick and Adriano.

When Italian-born Pasquale Zappia and his wife Mayra opened Via Oliveto in Toronto in 1988, the business was a combination restaurant/bakery serving area hotels, restaurants and caterers. A baker by trade, Pasquale handled the bakery. His wife ran the restaurant, followed by their sons Patrick and Adriano when they were old enough. Pasquale had always put his own spin on Italian breadmaking, but when he began baking crispy artisanal flatbread crackers — essentially a European-style flatbread cracker — he truly found his niche.

As demand for the triangular flatbread spiked among their food service customers, it became Pasquale's sole focus. In 2006, the family sold the restaurant, and the sons joined their father in the bakery as it relocated to a 2,000 square-foot facility in Toronto. In 2007, they started packaging the product

for retail sales in a few local food shops and "Pasquale's Glorious Flatbread" was born. Soon it was also selling in area supermarkets, and by 2009 Via Oliveto moved into an 8,000 square foot location in Vaughan, just north of Toronto.

The manual production process

To produce the flatbread, the family evolved a unique, labor-intensive process involving convection baking in rack ovens. Their 24" wide system included a bowl mixer, a three-roll sheeter, three gauge rolls and 18" by 26" pans. Semi-automatic equipment sprayed the cut triangular pieces of dough with water, salt, seeds and herbs before the trays were manually placed into the rack ovens to bake, then manually removed to cool. This process included four double rack ovens with 32 aluminum racks and 2,500 baking pans, all of it handled by four people.



Dough feeds into a sheeter and 2 gauge rolls.



Dough travels through the rotary cutting station.



Rotary cut dough pieces pass through the cooker.

Production on this system peaked at about 100 kg per hour, and it made growing the bakery a challenge. In 2015, Patrick's wife, Rachel, began managing the business and relieved much of the administrative pressure, but the production pain points remained. The Zappias knew they wanted to upgrade to a more automated, labor-saving solution, they just didn't know how.

The family began reaching out to tunnel oven manufacturers in 2019 to explore their options. Their efforts included a trip to the International Baking Industry Exposition (IBIE) in Las Vegas, where they met more oven manufacturers and got system quotes. Some of those OEMs didn't quite understand what the Zappias needed, and others proposed oven systems that were either too big, or too expensive. The family found the process overwhelming, but luckily, found their way to the RBS booth.

Meeting RBS at IBIE

The Zappias were struck by how confident RBS was that they could help Via Oliveto move from rack ovens to a tunnel oven system. "We thought, how could this be so easy for them?" recalls Patrick Zappia. "We thought it was going to be such a challenge – but, RBS made it sound like the opposite." The family was impressed by the company's willingness to work with such a small bakery. They also liked that RBS, unlike some of their competitors, was proposing a one-stop-shop solution that featured an integrated sheeting line and oven, and the flexibility to produce new products in the future.

Eager to take the next step, the Zappias invited RBS to Via Oliveto to observe their production process and further assess their requirements. After seeing the family's flatbread line in action, RBS technical sales reps proposed a configuration of the modular, fully automated Multi-Crisp Baked Snack System. The Zappias were impressed with the RBS visit and proposal but remained wary of making such a big move. To help allay their concerns, RBS invited the Zappias to the company's Science & Innovation Center for a flatbread trial run.

R&D product trials at RBS

In January 2020, Pasquale, Patrick and Adriano made the eight-hour drive to the RBS Science & Innovation Center to see how the Multi-Crisp System would handle their five flatbread varieties. The pieces of the system were all available for demonstration in smaller, pilot-sized equipment. The Zappias wanted to be sure that the final products would be similar enough to what they were already producing that their customers wouldn't notice any difference.

Their concerns were addressed quickly. Although the Innovation Center was booked for a two-day trial, they successfully created all the flatbread recipes on the first day. In fact, the Multi-Crisp System actually improved product quality. By eliminating the hot and cold spots the family faced with their rack ovens, the RBS system delivered a more even baking process that gave the flatbread a better mouthfeel.



Topping dispensers distribute salt, seeds or herbs as each recipe requires.

After seeing the Multi-Crisp System up close and tasting the results, the Zappias were convinced that going with RBS was the right decision. Within a few months, Via Oliveto and RBS closed the deal, even as COVID-19 quarantines were in full swing.

Complications during the pandemic

Despite the pandemic, Via Oliveto's orders remained steady as RBS manufactured their production line. Meanwhile, Rachel searched for both a larger facility to fit the new line and funding sources to pay for it all. She found an 18,000 square foot facility in Barrie, Ontario that was still under construction when the family committed to it in February 2021. In March 2021, she learned that Via Oliveto had secured a \$500,000 repayable contribution from the Canadian government for which she had applied months earlier.

Just as things appeared to be falling into place, construction delays at the new facility in Barrie forced the Zappias to stay in their old location longer than they wanted. The delays also meant the new facility would not be ready for the scheduled delivery date of the RBS Multi-Crisp System. RBS was able to hold on to the system components for several more weeks, a critical delay that gave the Zappias the extra time they needed to find a storage solution.

System installation and setup

RBS installed Via Oliveto's new Multi-Crisp System in September 2021 as the family kept baking in their old facility. The roughly three-week overlap was made easier by the RBS project team responsible for installing the new system and instructing the Zappias on its operation. "We needed a lot of



Dough pieces exit the 48" wide SPECTRUM OVEN® and head for packaging.

handholding," Patrick recalls. "But the RBS project managers were amazing and always available."

The RBS system configured for Via Oliveto uses a non-RBS mixing bowl, as the Zappias wanted to upgrade to a larger model of the same mixing bowl they were already comfortable with. The bowl mixes 200 kg batches of dough at a time, which a bowl elevator then dumps into a hopper that feeds into a 3-roll sheeter, two gauge rolls, then a rotary cutter with two die rolls – a docking roll that puts holes in the dough so it won't pillow in the oven, and an acetyl rotary cutting roll that creates the triangular flatbread pieces.

Next, the cut dough moves on a conveyor into a caustic cooker, where it is doused with pressurized water before RBS Omega topping dispensers distribute salt, seeds or herbs as each recipe requires. The dough pieces then travel into a 48" wide SPECTRUM OVEN® with two baking zones and an open weave baking mesh.

Via Oliveto today and tomorrow

At the time of this writing, Patrick and Adriano have been running the Multi-Crisp System for about 15 months. Flatbread production has quadrupled to 400 kg per hour, and the brothers are setting their sights on a long-term goal of 600 kg. What used to require three to four people can now be accomplished with "one-and-a-half to two," notes Patrick.

While his father Pasquale is no longer physically involved in the line operation, the brothers look to him for his baking wisdom and experience. And thanks to the automated features of the Multi-Crisp System, they now have more time and freedom to integrate his advice. As Patrick explains, "We don't have to worry about opening oven doors, checking on the product, adding baking time, closing oven doors – the oven part of our production is now 100% hands-off, so we can really focus on other parts of the process."

The flexible Multi-Crisp System has also allowed them to start baking a "pretzelized" version of their flatbread, or as Patrick calls it, "a European-style artisan pretzel." Currently the Zappias produce the pretzel for private label sales but soon intend to offer them to the Canadian and US supermarkets now stocking their flatbread. To do so, they are awaiting the installation of a new automated packaging system they recently ordered. Once it's in place, they plan to boost production overall and aim all their products at more supermarkets and big box retailers.

So, what closing words of advice does Patrick have for other small bakeries thinking about working with RBS? "Do it! Throughout this whole process I always felt like we've been listened to and that we were working with a company who's going to do everything they can to make us a success."



"Pasquale's Glorious Flatbread" varieties

- Original Sea Salt
- Herbs and Onion
- Sesame Seed
- Everything
- Cranberry and Pumpkin Seeds