



The cookie machine that went global



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Mon, 2013-05-20

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Though all but a handful are unaware of it, every day hundreds of millions of people eat food baked in an oven descended from a novelty cookie-making machine invented by a demobbed Australian serviceman half a century ago.

“After the Second World War ended, my father Kevin left the air force and started a baking business in Melbourne,” explains Amanda Hicks, co-CEO of Auto-Bake. “He didn’t have much formal education but was what Australians call a ‘bush engineer’ and created a cookie-making machine, which he christened the Serpentine oven, that allowed customers to buy a batch of cookies made before their eyes in a shop.”

Fast forward five decades and contemporary iterations of Kevin’s cookie machine are producing literally countless numbers of food products.

“One of our ovens can produce 1.5 million muffins a day. So try to add up what all of our systems produce in a year and the numbers just become ridiculous – trust me, I’ve tried,” laughs Hicks.



“Suffice to say that if you’ve eaten a scone from Starbucks, a muffin from a McCafe, any of the Entenmann’s Little Bites range or a baked good from Walmart, you’ve probably eaten something made in one of our ovens.”

Hicks attributes the Serpentine oven’s world-conquering success to both its original design and the resources subsequently poured into R&D. “Retail space is at a premium so dad created a machine with a compact footprint. That resulted in an oven that was energy efficient and user-friendly. More importantly, there was always a drive to keep evolving it, to produce more advanced baking systems that could incorporate other processes, such as proofing, cooling, packing, washing and drying, and do so in a manner that lowered production costs.”

The result of this obsession with innovation? Over the post-war decades Kevin Hicks’ company expanded its retailing and wholesaling of baked products before pivoting to become a baking equipment supplier. After cracking first the Australian then the South East Asian markets, Auto-Bake became a truly global operation after conquering North America in 1993. “Our ovens are now used throughout Europe, Asia and the Middle East,” notes Hicks. “We’ve been very focused on North America for a long time and we’re currently making a big push into South America.

“We believe the markets in Latin America are now ready for us and that the technology and expertise we have to offer is very relevant there. One of Auto-Bake’s top food engineers, Osvaldo Demin, who’s Argentinian by birth, is currently in the region overseeing the launch of our technology there.”

In order to recapitalise and expand, as well as transition away from being a family-owned business, in 2011 the Hicks clan sold Auto-Bake to Middleby Corporation, one of the food-service equipment industry’s heavy hitters. “While we’re now owned by an American corporation, there’s still a lot of Aussie DNA in the company,” says Hicks. “The technology is made, and always will be, by a team of 70 people based in Sydney with unreplicable knowledge and experience in creating bespoke industrial baking systems to meet our customers’ specific needs.”

While it’s easy to indulge in nostalgia for a time when more cooking was done in the home, Hicks is quick to point out the economic, social and health benefits generated by the industrial-scale food production Auto-Bake systems facilitate.

“The reality is when women go out to work more food products are produced by big companies,” says Hicks. “We are focused on helping our customers provide quality food products at affordable prices. We design systems that allow the use of authentic ingredients used in home cooking. And, despite all the positive emotional connotations of homemade food, products such as bread made by big companies that rigorously monitor quality are comparatively much safer, particularly in developing countries.

“I’m very proud that Auto-Bake has made a significant contribution to sustainability, both by reducing by a third the amount of energy used per kilo of baked product in our systems and by working with clients to extend the shelf life of their products to make sure they end up in people’s stomachs rather than landfill.”

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