

Firm cracks market with almond products

PICCOLA CUCINA SIGNS DEAL TO STOCK 100 STORES

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Mother-and-daughter team of Anita, left, and Pina Romolo, co-owners of Piccola Cucina, a Winnipeg firm which manufacturers Italian gourmet products made from almonds.

A small, local firm that manufacturers Italian gourmet products made from almonds could see its sales take off this year after striking a deal with a B.C. [company](#) to have its goods distributed across Western Canada.

Piccola Cucina, which is co-owned by the mother-daughter team of Anita and Pina Romolo, recently negotiated a deal with specialty foods distributor [Canadian Choice Wholesalers](#) that will see it distribute Piccola Cucina's products to natural-food and grocery stores in British Columbia, Alberta and Saskatchewan.

Pina Romolo said Thursday the partnership could potentially put their products on the shelves of more than 100 more [stores](#) in the three provinces.

"This is a very exciting opportunity for us," she said. "I'm forecasting this account alone will potentially double our sales (this year), if not more, which means hiring more people and potentially expanding our (production) facility."

Although Piccola Cucina has been in business for eight years, it's still relatively modest in size. Its production facility at Unit 14, 360 Keewatin St. employs two full-time and four part-time workers, plus Pina and her mother.

Pina Romolo said it's too soon to say how many more workers they'll hire this year, but it will be at least two. Until they see how much their sales increase, it's also hard to predict how much they'll need to expand production.

There is room to expand at their current location, she said, which means they won't have to halt production in order to move their equipment to a different facility. They'll expand into the vacant unit next door.

While the company has been in business since 2009, Pina Romolo noted it was just a part-time operation for the first four or five years while they refined their products and packaging. But since becoming a full-time operation, they've doubled their sales each year, she said.

The company's lineup of almond products includes its own brand of almond flour, two types of gluten-free pie and tart shells, and six flavours of Italian macaroons.

Pina Romolo said DeLuca Brothers has been distributing their products in Manitoba for several years, and she recently started distributing them herself to stores in Ontario and parts of the United States. The hope is that if she builds up a client list on her own, they'll land a distributor for Eastern Canada.

"It's hard to get into stores until you have a distributor, and it's hard to get a distributor until you have a book of business. So it's sort of chicken and egg."

She said they were able to strike a deal with the western distributor after their company was one of 12 businesses selected last year to participate in the second cohort of Canadian entrepreneur/television personality Arlene Dickinson's District Ventures, which is a non-profit accelerator dedicated to connecting growth-stage companies in the consumer packaged-goods industry with a network of business supports that includes mentors, investors and distributors.

"Our relationship was sort of solidified because of our involvement with District Ventures," she said.

She noted the distributor has an extensive catalogue of specialty food products that are environmentally and socially responsible and are made from natural ingredients. It has relationships with many natural food and grocery stores throughout Western Canada. So it's a good fit for Piccola Cucina and its products, she said.

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Read more by Murray McNeill.