

Innovation lands snack makers in Hall of Fame

Hinsdale business exports worldwide

By **KIMBERLY FORNEK**
Pioneer Press

This Hinsdale business has been selling award-winning snacks for nearly 30 years, and the recipe for a successful product is not simple or secret.

"It's a lot of trial and error," said Paul Cipolla, who started Plocky's Fine Snacks in 1988 with Fred Plochman, a former co-worker in the food industry.

The trials paid off this summer as Cipolla was inducted into the Specialty Food Association's Hall of Fame, for the innovative snacks, such as hummus chips and multigrain tortilla chips, Plocky's has launched over the years.

One of the company's first products was popcorn pizza. The partners melted cheese over popcorn, topped it with a pizza sauce and made it crunchy. That product did not catch on.

"It was too far out," Cipolla said.

"But we had developed this way of covering popcorn with cheese and making it crunchy," he said.

What resulted were clusters of melted cheese and popcorn. Plocky's marketed and sold that as Ultimate Popcorn. It was popular until consumers started looking for low-fat snacks.

At the time rice cakes were popular, Cipolla said, and Snack Wells came out with fat-free cookies. Sales

of Ultimate Popcorn fell.

"It tasted great, but it had 12 grams of fat per serving," Cipolla said.

The next product was a miss, fat-free seasoned pretzels.

"Pretzels are dry to begin with," Cipolla said. Making them fat-free resulted in even drier pretzels.

Tortilla chips were becoming popular, but Cipolla noticed no one was combining ingredients in the chips.

"We thought, let's make a multigrain chip," Cipolla said.

They developed a three-grain tortilla chip, made with whole grain corn, whole brown rice and cracked Bulgar wheat in 1998.

"We came up with those three, and it took off," Cipolla said.

They followed the original chip with two other varieties: black beans and rice, and red beans and rice with Louisiana style pepper sauce.

"All the flavor was cooked into the chip, not added as a topping that would get on your fingers," Cipolla said.

In 2010, Diabetic Living Magazine named the three-grain tortilla chip one of the top 25 diabetic snacks, based on its nutritional content and blind consumer taste tests.

When Americans started buying hummus, Plocky's created an all-natural hummus chip with chick peas, olive oil and other ingredients, then added other choices, such as Greek



KIMBERLY FORNEK/PIONEER PRESS PHOTOS

Paul Cipolla, of Plocky's Fine Snacks, seen with wife Diane, was inducted into Specialty Food Association's Hall of Fame.



Plocky's Fine Snacks developed a three-grain tortilla chip in 1998 and followed it with two other varieties.

lemon and herb, roasted garlic or roasted red pepper hummus chips.

The chips have garnered awards from organizations, such as the Sweets & Snack Expo.

Originally, Cipolla worked in the lab to test and create new recipes. More recently, he has developed items with co-packers who produce and package them in the Midwest.

In 2010, Diane Cipolla, Plocky's vice president of sales and Paul's wife, launched an export campaign for Plocky's. The company joined the Food Export Association of the Midwest USA, a government program that helps food and agricultural producers export overseas.

International buyers also attend the Fancy Foods Show held twice a year in New York. It was at the Summer Fancy Food Show in June that Paul Cipolla was inducted into Specialty Food Association's Hall of Fame, which honors the accomplishments and innovations of individuals in the specialty food industry. Other inductees that day included celebrity chef Rick Bayless, owner of Frontera Grill and Frontera Foods.

Plocky's snacks are sold in specialty stores across the

United States and internationally in Australia, China, Dubai, Indonesia, Israel and South Korea.

Selling overseas takes a lot of work and a lot of patience, Diane Cipolla said, but meeting all the exporters is her favorite part of the job.

"It's always interesting," she said.

Plocky's snacks can be found closer to home, too, in stores, such as Kramer Foods and the Fruit Store in Hinsdale.

Plocky's headquarters is at 15 Spinning Wheel Road in Hinsdale, chosen because it was conveniently located between Plochman's Northbrook home and Cipolla's in Oak Lawn. In 2007, Plochman died, and Cipolla took over his interest.

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