

STRONG TEAMS, GROWING COMPANIES

RUSTIC CRUST

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How does a small, all-natural pizza business feed a national appetite?

According to Brad Sterl, president and CEO of Rustic Crust Inc., the one thing you don't do is cut corners on quality.

To differentiate Rustic Crust pizza in the vast market of prepared pizzas, this Pittsfield-based company makes its crusts and frozen pizzas by hand, using all-natural and organic ingredients.

Sterl says he uses premium ingredients such as flour without chemical leaveners, organic olive oil, and locally sourced cheese, and he allows a long rising time for the dough. While the extra work results in great tasting pizza, it doesn't lend itself easily to typical manufacturing processes.

"Machines force you to change the product to fit the machine, and the product suffers," says Sterl. "If the machine didn't do exactly what we wanted it to, we modified the machine."

Sterl, a former Foodie's Gourmet Pizza executive with a history in food service, developed an assembly line that included hand-stretching and hand-topping dough stations, and a novel packaging process to ensure the ingredients remained fresh.

He perfected the process for three years before launching the Rustic Crust brand in 2005. Within a year, Rustic Crust was the top-selling all-natural and organic pizza crust in the country, according to Sterl.

Rustic Crust then embarked on a major expansion when, in 2010, it acquired a license agreement with American Flatbread, another organic and hand-made frozen

pizza brand. That business has grown five-fold.

"We built, to our knowledge, the only wood-fired production line in the U.S.," says Sterl.

Sales of Rustic Crust products continue to rise and revenue has grown from \$800,000 in 2005 to a projected \$22-plus million in 2014, an average 40 percent annual growth, says Sterl.



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Quality products have always been important to Rustic Crust, but Sterl says people are the other key ingredient in the company's recipe for success.

"All of our employees believe in the products they make," he says. "We wouldn't be successful if it wasn't for all these people."

Sterl empowers employees to succeed—every worker has the authority to discard imperfect products or stop the production line.

Sterl says he chose to locate Rustic Crust in Pittsfield as much for its picturesque setting as for the opportunity to have a positive effect on the community.

"I thought it was an opportunity for the community; it needed jobs," says Sterl. The company, which had fewer than 10 employees in 2005, has about 100 today. Rustic Crust promotes from within as supervisory positions become available. "We also move a lot of temporary workers to full time," added Sterl.

Like any company, Rustic Crust has had its share of headaches, but Sterl says workers always rise to the challenge. For example, several years ago, when a new packaging machine wasn't working properly, "employees came together to monitor this machine while we had a new one built."

Securing capital was also a challenge, until he found the right group of investors. "They're socially minded and they believe in the environment," he says.

Rustic Crust has reached a number of milestones since its founding, though the one that stands out to Sterl is the ability to give back. It has baked pizzas to feed New Jersey relief workers and residents impacted by Hurricane Sandy. Rustic Crust has also participated in benefits for wounded military veterans, including the Wounded Warrior Project and the Independence Fund. 🍕