

# Round ravioli shaped success

By Bill Glovin  
Special to The Record

Thirty-seven years have passed since Dominick Celentano's in-laws challenged him to make a better ravioli in his Italian delicatessen than the bland, square-shaped ravioli the family had just digested at Sunday dinner.

That night, he went down to his basement and designed a round ravioli with the help of the rim of a water glass. Today, he's chief executive officer of Celentano Inc., the metropolitan area's largest seller of Italian frozen-food entrees, according to Selling Markets Areas Inc. (SAMI) in New York.

His company, Celentano, had sales of \$20 million in 1982 in what is a \$25-billion frozen foods industry. Ravioli and dinner entrees each make up 35 percent of Celentano's sales. Quick-fix pizza comprises the last 30 percent.

"My mother used to make ravioli round, which was the traditional shape of ravioli in southern Italy," says Celentano, who was raised in Newark. "Eventually, I happened upon an empty frozen orange juice can because it cut more efficiently than the water glass."

Celentano sold his first batch of ravioli fresh, over the counter at his Newark delicatessen. It proved so popular that the next weekend his regular customers and their friends were back asking for more. The demand soon grew so great that Celentano hired eight Italian grandmothers who did nothing all day but turn out ravioli in the back room.

Supermarkets approached Celentano in 1963 and asked to carry his homemade ravioli. But since ravioli only stays fresh for 48 hours, he began offering his supermarket ravioli frozen.

## Working couples' alternative

Meanwhile, the demand for frozen foods was beginning to come from housewives joining the work force in large numbers. With less time and energy to prepare meals for their families, working couples began to look for alternatives. Celentano was there with the first round frozen ravioli on the East Coast.

Before long, the company was producing frozen lasagna, manicotti, and stuffed shells in addi-

tion to ravioli. Celentano eventually sold his Newark stores and moved the food production to a plant in Springfield and then Newark, before settling in Verona in 1966. Today, 120 employees produce and market 13 frozen-food entrees and sauces and some 20 products overall.

Recipes for the products have been passed down through several generations, says Celentano. His wife, Doris, and sister, Anna, work with a research and development technician to develop new recipes and improve current offerings. Before a product goes into production, the family usually sits together at a meal to sample it.

## Family business

"Your job title doesn't matter much because everyone in the family is involved in all aspects of the business," says Doris Celentano.

Celentano, 58, a low-key perfectionist who tours the facilities two to three times daily, takes pride in his relationship with employees. "Most of the people working here are related to someone else and we usually hire based on recommendations," he says. "I realize the factory work is tedious, but if you show your employees you're interested, then they'll be interested, too."

The company owns two factory buildings which are almost directly across from one another on Bloomfield Avenue. In addition to production facilities, one houses administrative offices and the other, a store where fresh and boxed pasta, Celentano goods, and test-marketed products are sold.

The pasta is made with a giant dough mixer that combines flour with eggs to give the pasta a high protein content and rich taste. A blending machine nearby mixes eggs, three kinds of cheese, and spices for filling. The dough and filling, carried by hand to several short assembly lines, is automatically inserted into various pastas, partially cooked and frozen in a new nitrogen tunnel.

The tunnel, which the Celentano people helped design, is capable of processing 134,000 pounds a day, using the same amount of plant space and producing four times the amount as the old tunnel. Besides pasta machines, other Celentano innovations include the listing of

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Dominick Celentano, left, with son, Dominick Jr., and wife, Doris.

Staff photo by Joe Giardelli