

# All in the family – father and son carry on Detroit baking tradition

By Rick Asher

Unlike most college freshman, DAC member George Kordas knew exactly what he'd be doing when he graduated from the University of Colorado in 2005.

As the third generation in a family-founded, owned and managed Hamtramck baking company, Kordas grew up in the business and was excited to join his father and grandfather to carry on a Michigan-made tradition which began in 1945.

"It's something I always thought I was going to do for a living," said Kordas who has successfully applied his degrees in economics and business to help run the family business.

"I've been working in the bakery since I was a little kid," he continued. "My summer jobs throughout high school and college were spent in the bakery on the assembly line, in the wrapping department, mixing bread and loading trucks on the shipping dock; and in 2005, I came back and started working full time."

Founded by Kordas' 92-year-old grandfather George Kordas in 1945, Metropolitan Baking Company has been producing bread at the same location for nearly 70 years, currently supplying over 150 bread products to thousands of restaurants, schools, institutions, food service companies, retail outlets and private label companies across the country.

Leadership of the business remains firmly in family hands led by Kordas' father James Kordas, the company's CEO and president and a long-time DAC member, who is assisted by his son, the company's vice president and his nephew-in-law, General Manager Mike Zrimec.



James and George Kordas with general manager Mike Zrimec.

The company has continually diversified its customer base, expanding its product line while increasing and automating its manufacturing footprint over the years to succeed in good times and in bad.

"Our sales have increased every year since 2008 and that's something we've been pretty proud of," said Kordas who attributes this success to the bakery's diversification. "We've slowly diversified our customer base into food service, retail and private label businesses while maintaining our niche of restaurants, schools and institutions."

In 1945, George Kordas, a highly successful and well-liked Ford Motor Company salesman, retired from selling cars to open the bakery out of two small houses on a plot of land he bought on Lumpkin Street in Hamtramck.

"Initially, it was just a real small kind of mom and pop bake shop where people actually just came in off the

street buying products, just a few loaves here and a few loaves there," said the founder's grandson.

From those humble beginnings, the company initially expanded to supply a handful of local restaurants with Pullman breads via 12 delivery routes which today have grown to over 90 throughout Michigan.

Along the way, Metropolitan started supplying IBC, also known as Wonder Bread and Hostess.



Founder George Kordas.

"We're a company that was always willing to take on that kind of product and it led to us getting even more of that business, ultimately growing to the point where it became a mainstay and high volume product for us," said Kordas.

As the business grew, nearby homes were purchased and knocked down to expand the business. Since 1945, the company went from a couple thousand square feet of space and a handful of employees to 80,000 square feet and 75 workers.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, the bakery had an extremely labor intensive and manual production process, far slower than its competitors. That all changed when Kordas' father James Kordas graduated from college.

"My father ended up coming back after graduating from Michigan State and said that we had to automate," Kordas noted.

Unlike his son, James didn't always know he was going to get into the family business. Although he was riding around on bread trucks since



Above and left, today's modern facilities help Metropolitan Baking Company better serve its customers throughout the region.



## Metropolitan Baking Co.

he was six years old, James juggled law school and the family business before hanging up his legal dreams to work at the bakery full time.

“He ended up working side by side with my grandfather on the floor, and slowly pushing this company into a more positive direction,” said his son. “That kind of young fresh blood is what really helped to make this company what it is today.

“My grandfather had been working hard for a long time and my father was able to come in and really grow the business.”

Part of that growth took place 14 years ago when the bakery expanded their manufacturing facility to start producing buns they previously delivered to customers by purchasing them from a competitor.

Metropolitan has been producing a wide range of their own buns ever since. The Hamtramck baking company's most recent expansion 10 years ago enlarged their loading dock.

Over the last 10 years, Metropolitan has also expanded its customer base to include retail outlets, private label businesses and food service companies.

Although the bakery is not allowed to divulge the names of its private label clients, it supplies some of the largest restaurant franchises in the country.

The baking company also supplies some of the largest food service suppliers in the country who ship Metropolitan's frozen baked goods to customers across the country.

Today Metropolitan's breads are sold in hundreds of primarily independent grocery stores around Southeastern Michigan. The products are wrapped in bags bearing “Hearth Oven Bakers” and “Michigan Baking Company” brand names for delivery to customers both large and small.

“We're different from other bakeries in that we're willing to deliver and produce bread products whether you're the smallest restaurant on the block or the largest volume customer,” Kordas explained.

Metropolitan customers include many small, independently-owned businesses and a number of larger more recognizable names including Sam's Club, Sysco, U.S. Foods, Gordon



The original company headquarters in 1945-50.

Foods, Big Boy, 7-11, MGM Grand, Chicken Shack, Tubbys, The Detroit Zoo, The Palace of Auburn Hills, GM, Chrysler, DTE Energy, Wayne State and coney island chains such as National, American, Leos and Lafayette.

American Coney Island was one of Metropolitan's first customers.

“We have been working with Metropolitan Baking Company since the beginning, and they have always treated us like family,” said American's Grace Keros. “They have, without a doubt, the best hot dog buns in Detroit.”

“If you're eating a hot dog or a sandwich around Southeastern Michigan, there's a pretty good chance it's coming from our facility,” said Kordas.

That includes the DAC whose wide array of homemade baked goods is supplemented by Metropolitan breads.

With the DAC as an effective business tool and with a solid vision for the future, Kordas is confident that the family business, which has thrived during good times and bad for three generations, will continue to succeed well into the next generation as he proudly carries on a family tradition that began nearly 70 years ago.



George Kordas with some sample products inside the company operation.