



Buddy's Kitchen in the Twin Cities suburb of Burnsville, has approximately 200 employees

# Omelets and more

Buddy's Kitchen has expanded its reach beyond the airline market and is working make its Twin Cities facility a model for safety and custom frozen products

By RICK LINDSTROM

Buddy's Kitchen's signature omelet was first made for North Central Airlines in 1974

Buddy's vice president of operations Lyle Herrmann (right) and national sales manager Brad Wetherbee after a tour of the plant.



In the beginning, there was an omelet, an airline and a man people called Buddy, who came to Minneapolis/St. Paul from a small town in the central Minnesota lake country.

Nils "Buddy" Eian is gone, and so is his first customer, North Central Airlines. But Buddy's Kitchen remains in the family, and its founder's signature omelet is still being produced at the rate of 75,000 per month for the first class domestic cabin on Delta Air Lines. It is joined by dozens of other sandwiches and entrees that travel to customers as far away as Honolulu. Although its airline business is not what it used to be, the company has for 35-plus years been a steady supplier to the aviation industry, and has recently added substantially to its business with the addition of retail and grocery customers.

Buddy's has also entered into a second year of cooperation with Atlanta-based AMI Inflight, while at the same time continuing to deliver frozen sandwiches and other products to the LSG Sky Chefs unit at MSP. A new hometown airline, Sun Country, is also serving Buddy's products to passengers. Other transportation sector customers include Continental Airlines, Continental Micronesia, KLM Royal Dutch Airlines, American Airlines and Amtrak.

"One of the beauties of Buddy's is its ability to mobilize, responding to how airlines have changed over the years," said Brad Wetherbee, national sales manager at Buddy's Kitchen located approximately 10 miles from Minneapolis/St. Paul International Airport. Though the unit has automated much of its processes its 200 employees still carry out a large amount of the work by hand.

PAX International visited the kitchen early one afternoon as the production shift just was ending its day. Finished product moved briskly from the production area to one of the operation's large freezers and crews cleaned the work area. Some of the products were bound for operators like large membership warehouse Sam's Club or retailers such as Wal-Mart and a number of large grocery chains that the company now has for customers.

Approximately 65 percent of the Buddy's Kitchen sales are now outside the airline industry. Company president and CEO Dave Smith said that this external business increased to the company's revenue by 40 percent last year.

But for airline business, Buddy's relies on AMI Inflight, to keep the company abreast of future tenders and market the company's products and capabilities. The relationship with AMI began around the

time of the merger of Delta Air Lines and Northwest Airlines. Buddy's has become a steady supplier to the newly merged entity.

"Delta has been very open and receptive to the products we provide, and believe me, we feel very fortunate to be a supplier to Delta Air Lines today," said Wetherbee.

The company is also moving ahead on other fronts. By the end of this year, Buddy's Kitchen plans to have in place an important certification - and will be one of the first aviation suppliers to receive it.

For the past two years, Buddy's kitchen has been readying operations to pass a Safe Quality Food (SQF) Certification. To do so, the operation must conform to a strict set of worldwide guidelines that include food safety plans, HACCP, quality management systems development, audit data management, training and a number of other requirements.

SQF is "one of the most recognized and one of the most stringent of the food safety guidelines," said Tom Webber, manager of quality assurance at Buddy's Kitchen. "Basically, it is industry best practice as far as food safety and food quality across the board."

The certification is also an important tool as the company competes in a new environment outside the airline world. Retail operations such as Wal-Mart have made SQF a requirement to do business. So, before the end of the year, a team from Silliker Laboratories will be visiting the operation of conduct a multi-day SQF Audit.

Another not so official requirement seems to be done with less effort on the part of Buddy's Kitchen. "I think if you look at the way that Buddy's has carried on its business since 1974, you would find a really green company," said Smith.

Buddy's makes an effort to source raw materials from companies within 100 miles of its operation. With a number of well-known food companies in the 100-mile radius of the Twin Cities, Smith said sourcing locally is not a difficult task.

Last year the company recycled 256 tons of corrugated materials. This effort, combined with a program for waste reduction earned the company the ARROW Award from Dakota County where Buddy's has its headquarters. ARROW stands for Award for Reduction and Recycling of Waste, and is open to businesses in three Twin Cities suburbs. □