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# AMERICA'S NEXT TOP MODEL: BON APPETIT MANAGEMENT COMPANY

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BY ROSIE DEQUATTRO

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You wouldn't think you could get a "gourmet" meal in the rank-and-file cafeterias of corporate America these days; surely not an organic, seasonal, locally-sourced one. But there's a company that's part of the multi-billion-dollar food services management industry that can do just that. It's called Bon Appetit Management Company, and it serves-up locally sourced meals everyday in its corporate cafeterias nationwide.

You may be familiar with the names Aramark or Sodexo, large-venue catering company names. Giants in this arena, they control the daily food choices of millions of consumers world-wide. Bon Appetit, or BAMCO as it is sometimes called, may not be as familiar, but once you understand what they do, how they manage to serve over eighty million meals a year using local ingredients and sustainable business practices at over four hundred sites in twenty-nine states, you'll remember the name.

Founded in 1987 by Fedele and Michael Bauccio, and based on their belief that eating fresh, local, seasonal food is better for you and for the environment, Bon Appetit became a pioneer in socially responsible food sourcing. Its employees now number 10,000, posting annual revenues well over \$4 million. Best Buy, Target, Cisco Systems, and eBay are just a few of Bon Appetit's accounts. Within Massachusetts, accounts include MIT, Emmanuel College, and Cisco Systems to name just a few. Sustainability is a company passion and a core value, principles that are reinforced daily. Along with its commitment to buying locally, Bon Appetit makes it a priority to educate employees and guests about nutrition and the politics of food. Despite this ambitious mission, the California-based company has been growing by 20% a year.

So how do they do it? The conventional model in a food-services company is to centralize operational decision-making. Menu-planning, recipe development, and purchasing decisions are usually made by a few at the top, far removed from direct customer contact. Cyclical menus are mandated and emailed weekly from headquarters. Industrial-sized cans and prefabricated foods are standard because they help keep bottom-lines healthy and distribution on-track.

Bon Appetit's business model is unique. One of BAMCO's Executive Chefs, Michael Quackenbush, explains that the company operates more like a small, nimble boutique firm. It succeeds at its mission by nurturing a culture of chefs empowered to make their own decisions about what to cook at their individual sites, and given the freedom to adjust menus according to local market conditions. The company instills in its chefs with a passion for cooking with simple, fresh ingredients. It hosts regular workshops that chefs can participate in, like one recently held on Southeast Asian cooking techniques.

Ellen Rice is the Bon Appetit General Manager at Quackenbush's site. "That's the one thing why I love Bon Appetit—it's because there are no guidelines for recipes. There are no recipes you must adhere to. That keeps me here—just their belief in creativity; empowering each account." Chefs are free to hire their own kitchen staff, start business relationships with local producers, and create original menus that feature local foods based on what's available seasonally.

The company-wide "Farm to Fork" program is a major Bon Appetit initiative with the goal of having each chef purchase seasonal produce from local farmers and artisan producers within a 150 mile radius. The chefs are further challenged to serve the products within 48-hours of harvest. Bon Appetit concedes that buying 100% locally is not yet practical, but it should be the chef's first choice.

When Bon Appetit transferred Quackenbush to Massachusetts, he had a lot of work to do to identify the local producers he wanted to do business with. In addition to doing his own research, he reached out to organizations like Chefs' Collaborative, a Boston-based, national network of chefs, educators and producers that works to promote a sustainable food-supply system. "Sometimes I just go on the internet or use word-of-mouth. John O'Neil at Cisco Systems up in Boxborough led me to a lot of local farmers."

Quackenbush's kitchen feeds fifteen hundred people every day with mostly local, sustainable, made-from-scratch food. He makes all the sauces, soup stocks, salad dressings and spice mixes from scratch, roasts the turkey and beef in-house daily. "Our price points are low at this site. We don't go above \$5.25, and that's for a complete full meal." That means that the company can remain profitable while charging no more than \$5.25 for a lunch or dinner of mostly local, fresh foods. One day it might be a local, organic chicken with local root vegetables and a white bean salad. "It's really not that much more expensive to buy locally," Quackenbush asserts. "The tomatoes we get out of Maine are actually a lot cheaper than the commodity tomatoes right now."

Two of his main local suppliers are Lanni Orchards in Lunenburg, and Butter Brook Organic Farm in Acton. "It really gets rougher in winter, but it's not that difficult," says Quackenbush. He admits that throughout the winter months, choices are limited but Lanni Orchards, for example, continues to supply him with items like their own potatoes, onions, cider and apples. "We get our spring mix and mesclun mix year round from Butter Brook. Price doesn't fluctuate a whole lot. We get our romaine, tarragon, anything we need grows year-round in his greenhouses--and it's all 100% certified organic."

Another supplier, Vermont Smoke and Cure, provides Quackenbush with smoked meats year-round. Everyone wins with this model-- the client company gets kudos for treating its employees well, employees get good, healthy, affordable meals, the local economy benefits from regular commerce with local farmers and purveyors, which in turn benefits the environment by minimizing "food-miles" (the environmental impact of food production). An added benefit for cafeteria customers is that the server at each food station is the person who cooked the food. Customers have the opportunity to ask questions about what they're about to eat. Rice says, "We get compliments all the time from our guests here about our programs."

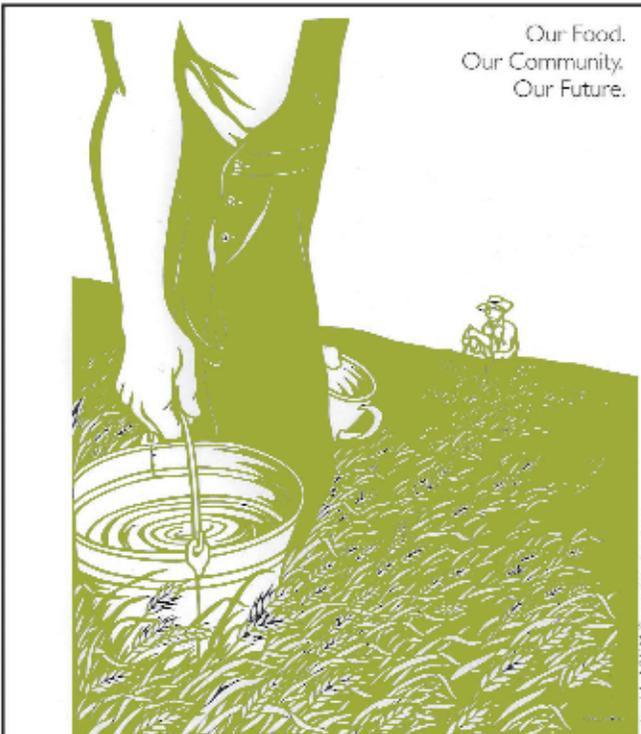
Sadly, using locally-caught fish is still too cost-prohibitive for Quackenbush's kitchen. Bon Appetit follows the Seafood Watch Guidelines from the Monterey Bay Aquarium, and Quackenbush will serve frozen fish that conforms to the guidelines.

A new effort BAMCO began in March is to eliminate trans-fats in all of their baked goods nationwide. Quackenbush chose Fantini Bakery in Haverhill, MA as his bread provider, noting that all Fantini's products are trans-fat-free, and preservative-free.

An earnest, young company, Bon Appetit is growing and constantly improving its mandate. Both customers and employees seem happy. Rice and Quackenbush say they love

their jobs. Key is the creative freedom they've been given. Rice says, "They take pride in what they do which is so important. And the customer feels so much more at ease." ❖

*Freelance writer, Rosie DeQuattro, became obsessed with food as a child when her mother sent her off to school with bread and chocolate sandwiches for lunch. The envy of her bologna-and-mayo-eating school mates, she still eats, cooks and blogs about the kind of peasant Italian food considered by many today as gourmet (<http://breadchocolate.blogspot.com>). Rosie originated the monthly culinary column at the former "Middlesex Beat" magazine.*



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