



JUST GETTING STARTED

After a steep learning curve, Michigan Bread takes its business to the next level with dreams of more.

by Charlotte Atchley

Buns cool at ambient temperature on a spiral cooler before being packaged.

Photography by Eli Lindauer.

Michigan Bread's tagline says it all: "It's not just bread ... it's family." When Spiros Assimacopoulos and his partners started Michigan Bread in Taylor, MI, nine years ago, he did it not only with his father's blessing but also with his values.

"He had a blank check from me, and he still does," said George Assimacopoulos, founder of Assimacopoulos Bakery Distributors that would eventually become Michigan Bread.

George Assimacopoulos built his bakery distribution business on hard work, good customer service and care for his employees, which eventually included his sons

and business partners, Spiros Assimacopoulos, president and CEO, and Andy Assimacopoulos, now vice-president at Michigan Bread. After starting a wholesale bakery in 2010 with zero baking experience, Spiros Assimacopoulos implemented those values but also relied on the support and grace of his family and their long-standing restaurant customers as he figured out the new business. He's reaped the rewards of that support and passed it onto his employees.

"We strive to operate like a high-functioning family," he said. "We're a group of hard-working people. One of our values is we give each other the benefit of the doubt. That



tions, one thing became clear as he interviewed for jobs and tried to find a career path: He wanted his own business; he didn't want to build a corporate career.

"I found myself more interested in executing a business than using my degree to write news stories about it," he said. And then there was the family draw as well. "Getting up every morning and going to work with your family name on the side of the truck — there's value in that," he added. "That's something you can believe in."

It's that personal attachment to which George Assimacopoulos attributes the company's success. "We're family," he said. "We work hard, and we care for each other. We use our brains, and we provide good service to our customers. I still have some of the same customers after 47 years."

Since Spiros Assimacopoulos and Andy Assimacopoulos joined the business in 1997, Assimacopoulos Bakery Distributors grew though the market began to shift. The economy was strong, but competition heated up with such a low barrier to entry into the distribution business. In 2006, after a few conversations with friendly competitor Mike Sanfilippo at Supreme Sales & Service, the two companies merged to become Assimacopoulos Supreme Bakery Distributors (ASB). The new company's customer base was further diversified and allowed George Assimacopoulos and Mr. Sanfilippo to focus on their respective strengths within the operation.

As the distribution market changed, Spiros Assimacopoulos wanted more for the business. "I wasn't satisfied with just a transactional business," he said. "Making bread is a wonderful thing. You're feeding people and, hopefully, helping them enjoy their day a little more. I saw value in making our own bread, owning a brand and making the products that we wanted to sell."

An opportunity came when one of their vendors, Baguette Bakery, began to struggle, and the owner decided to exit the business. The team decided to take the plunge into baking and purchased the business. "Doc was the first baker in the market to make brioche buns," Spiros Assimacopoulos said. "We didn't want to lose his high-quality product line, and we wanted to bake, so it was a perfect opportunity."

In 2010, Spiros Assimacopoulos opened Michigan Bread with ASB as its distribution department.

Starting from scratch

Initially, annual revenue at Michigan Bread was only \$250,000 with a team of three people. The initial challenge was building a staff. "We couldn't find anyone with baking experience," said Spiros Assimacopoulos, who would start baking at 7 p.m. and end at 5 a.m. He would sleep until noon and then spend the afternoon working the distribution side. After a quick break to have dinner

leads to respect for each other. That's what we work toward."

That investment in Michigan Bread's employees and a commitment to traditional baking methods using natural fermentation has Michigan Bread hitting its stride, and the team at Michigan Bread doesn't see things slowing down soon.

A family history

In 1969, George Assimacopoulos immigrated to the US from Greece. After settling down with his wife, Beverly, in Detroit, he found himself working for a distributor and thinking, "I could do this on my own." With his Plymouth Duster and one vendor, George began selling bread to local independently owned Greek restaurants around Detroit. From there Assimacopoulos Bakery Distributors was born.

Both of George Assimacopoulos's sons resisted the idea of joining their father's business after finishing college. But despite Spiros Assimacopoulos' degree in public rela-

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with his family, he would return to the bakery to do it all over again. That was the first seven months.

“Every day in baking is like getting on a roller coaster in the morning and riding it until it’s time to go home,” Spiros Assimacopoulos said. “Even to this day, we are still experiencing on-the-job training. Owning a bakery is a whole new world of responsibility, effort and involvement compared to the distribution model.”

To help with the learning curve, Spiros Assimacopoulos took every educational opportunity that came his way. He completed the AIB International online bak-

(From left) George Assimacopoulos, founder; Andy Assimacopoulos, vice-president; Mike Sanfilippo, vice-president of sales; and Spiros Assimacopoulos, president and CEO, started Michigan Bread nine years ago.

Michigan Bread

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ing course and attended four seminars in Manhattan, KS. He also turned to vendors for education, including seminars at King Arthur Flour, the French Pastry School in Chicago and The San Francisco Baking Institute. And he toured a lot of bakeries. “Despite how competitive this industry can be, most bakers are very gracious and are willing to share ideas from their operations,” he said.

Michigan Bread applies that type of on-the-job training to its staff of 160 employees today. Like every bakery in the US, that initial struggle to find skilled bakers persisted at Michigan Bread, so the team has invested in people, setting them on paths to become career bakers.

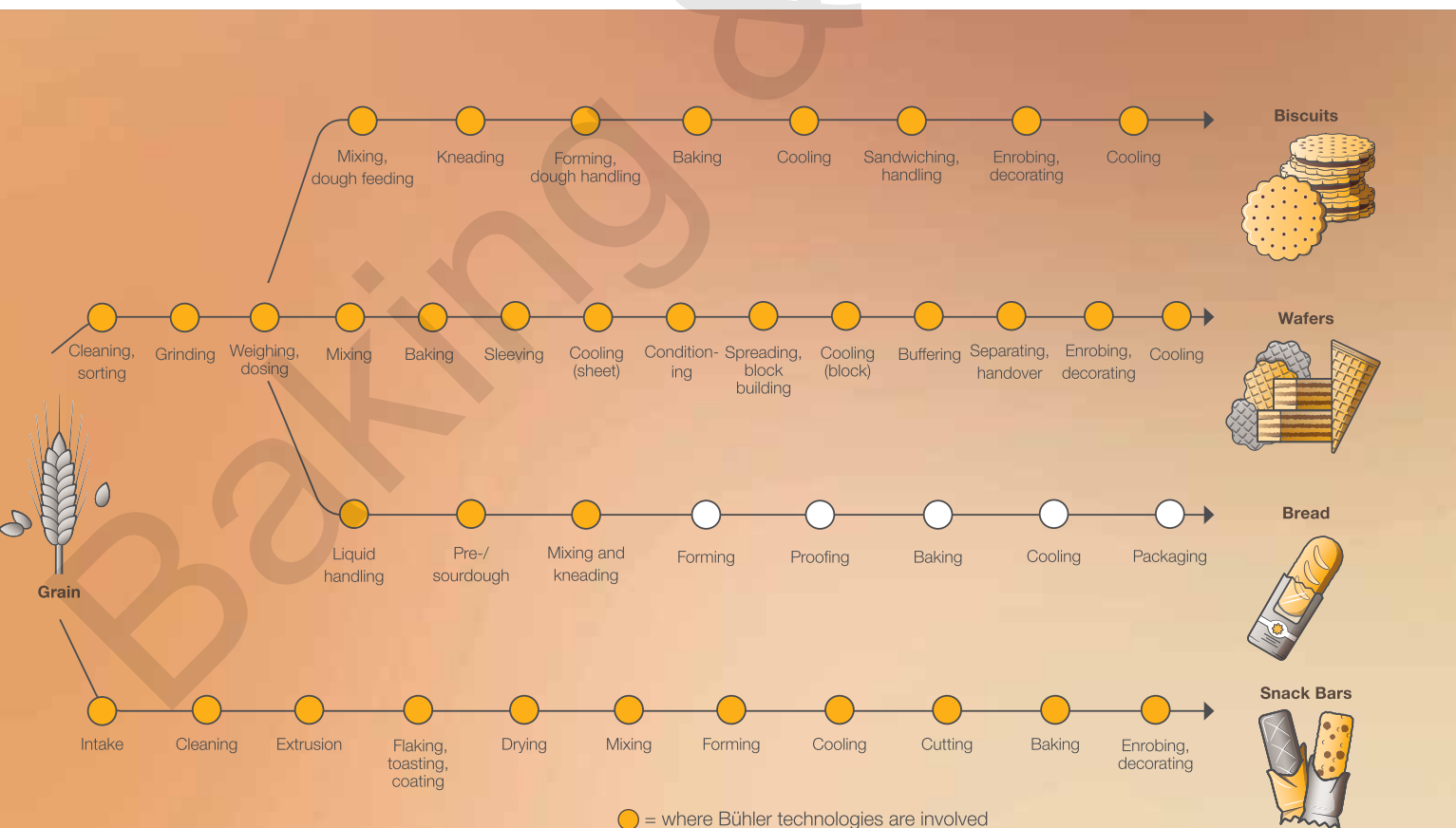
The bakery’s production manager, Greg Prokop, started out by applying egg wash on brioche buns. Cheikh Dabo began as baking assistant before becoming head baker and now production planner. Both men were some of the company’s first hires. “We found a lot of excellent people along the way,” Spiros Assimacopoulos said. “We hired people with no baking skills but who put their heart into it, and we trained them. They are responsible for our success today.”

Michigan Bread is currently in the process of formalizing and standardizing that education process. With each career advancement an employee makes, Michigan Bread will invest in that person’s training, whether that be on Good Manufacturing Practices (GMP), online AIB classes, supplier seminars, or leadership and management training when applicable.

Having strong relationships with distribution customers helped provide built-in business for Michigan Bread, and those customers were willing to stick with the team as they worked out the kinks in quality and process.

The bread itself started out reflecting what Baguette Bakery was already doing well — brioche, baguettes and Italian bread. Its product line now includes traditional buns and rolls, sandwich breads, ciabatta, and the company’s Detroit line of breads: 3-lb hearth-baked sandwich loaves, developed to serve bar-and-grill customers.

Spiros Assimacopoulos credits much of the bakery’s success to its commitment to natural fermentation. Michigan Bread products start with poolish, sourdough or biga that are fermented 18 to 24 hours before use.



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Michigan Bread is protective of preserving this part of the process, though it's not the most efficient style of production.

"It's the right way to make bread to me," he said. "We're proud of the quality of our products, and this method is key to that. It's what's most important as long as the business model is viable. I'd rather grow slowly or level off than compromise that value. It's our secret sauce, and it's not even a secret. We're just committed to making bread in this traditional way."

The commitment seems to be paying off, however, as the business isn't growing slowly at all. Since its start in 2010, Michigan Bread has grown to annual revenue of

Top: After being shaped, dough rests either in the retarder or proofer before being baked.

Bottom: Detroit breads are loaded into a thermal oil deck oven.



more than \$10 million. "We are proud of what we have accomplished for a group of guys who didn't know what they're doing," Spiros Assimacopoulos said. "Because of that growth, we've had to reinvent ourselves and our process a number of times. We have a lot of opportunity for growth going forward, and in many ways, we feel like we're just getting started."

To adapt to the growth and continue this trajectory, the company took its first steps into automation this year with two new production lines.

Touring the future

Throughout its history, Michigan Bread has only moved its location once, and for the time being, it's staying put. In 2012, the bakery relocated to a 61,000-sq-ft facility in suburban Detroit. Initially, this facility housed seven small production lines to handle the diverse production runs. With the latest equipment installations — two makeup lines from Koenig Bakery Systems — Michigan Bread has consolidated those seven production lines into three but increased throughput as well as overall quality. In the coming weeks, the neighboring business will move out, freeing up another 12,000 sq ft for future expansions: a second spiral cooling tower, automated proofing system and a tunnel oven.

Line No. 1 is a Menes-H sheeting line, and Line No. 2 is an IREX industrial roll line. With the introduction of the IREX, Spiros Assimacopoulos said bakers were able to increase hydration by 3%, which has several benefits including better machinability, improved flavor with increased volume and shelf life. Overall, this investment allowed the bakery to increase throughput by 250%. This is changing the face of Michigan Bread's customer from independent restaurants to regional chains. While the independents are Michigan Bread's backbone, broad-line distribution to larger customers in other states is the fastest-growing side of the business. To accommodate the broad-line food-service distributors, Michigan Bread purchased an offsite cold storage facility last year for products destined for other states throughout the Midwest and as far as Florida.

To deliver fresh bread daily requires deliveries of minor ingredients and flour multiple times a week. Flour is stored in a BB Impiati flour silo that holds up to 77,000 lb, and both flour and water are metered automatically. Two employees scale minor ingredients by hand using Doran scales with batch control to prevent over-scaling.

These ingredients are incorporated with poolish, sour-dough or biga in one of four mixers from Bertuetti and one from Koenig, the largest handling up to 300-kg (660-lb) batches. With the no-stress Koenig lines, the bakery



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Michigan Bread prides itself on its commitment to using preferments and long fermentation times to develop its breads' flavors.

doesn't need additives to protect the dough during processing; however, that means dough consistency — and temperature — is critical. This led Michigan Bread to invest in Maxium water and flour chillers. "In the summer, the flour comes in at 90°F, and there is no amount of ice that will cool that down," Spiros Assimacopoulos said.

While operators on Line No. 3 chunk dough by hand and add it into the makeup equipment, Lines Nos. 1 and 2 feature bowl hoists that lift mixing bowls and empty them into hoppers. Dough is chunked automatically and then either formed into a dough sheet on Line No. 1 or divided into dough pieces on Line No. 2. Line No. 3 is the last remnant of Michigan Bread's old way of doing things on the makeup side, and the impact to efficiency shows.

Line No. 1, which was making baguettes during *Baking & Snack's* visit, also handles the majority of the bakery's breads and ciabattas. The dough band travels through three sets of rollers — satellite roller, cross and standard sheeting — to get to its desired thickness. These rollers gently stretch the dough band to the appropriate thickness without imparting pressure on the dough. The dough sheet is cut into strips by roll cutters, and a guillotine cuts the dough into baguettes. A cross-roller and opposing moulder roll up and shape the

baguette pieces before they're automatically panned.

After dividing on Line No. 2, the dough pieces are moulded and panned automatically. While Line No. 1 only needs three employees to run it, Line No. 2 requires five.

Pans are racked and then moved to either the proofer or retarder, depending on the product's needs. Brioche, Italian bread and some ciabatta go into the retarder first. "It's double the handling and double the energy, but the difference in quality is akin to marinating a steak overnight or grilling it immediately," Spiros Assimakopoulos explained. "You start with the same material, but the end result is something completely different."

In 2012, Michigan Bread's proofer held 12 racks, but the bakery has since expanded its proofer capacity to 60 double racks of product. Once proofed, the bread moves to one of three types of ovens. Soft pan breads and rolls go into one of nine MIWE or Cinelli indirect-gas-fired convection ovens. Ciabatta and Detroit breads are placed in one of two thermal oil deck ovens after being hand-scored and sprayed with water. The rest of Michigan Bread's product portfolio is baked in one of seven MIWE thermal-oil ovens. Each one can bake three racks, 60 pans, at a time, a huge saving on space.

Michigan Bread lucked out when moving into this

With the new automation, dough is now automatically loaded into the hopper of the two new makeup lines by a bowl hoist.



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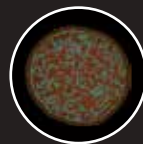
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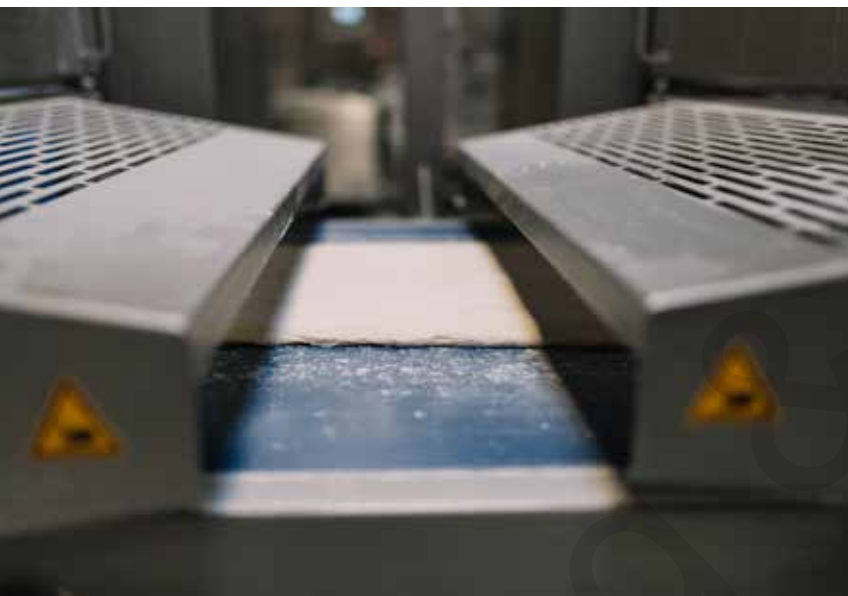
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and many others

Growing a bakery responsibly

As Michigan Bread dives into automation, sustainability initiatives seems like an obvious next step. “We think it’s important to start looking into reducing our carbon footprint as we continue to grow,” said Spiros Assimacopoulos, president and CEO of Michigan Bread.

The bakery is currently in the design phase to incorporate solar panels into its building as well as skylights. Tax rebates and the estimated 30 to 50% savings on electricity were appealing to a quickly growing business. And skylights make for a pleasant work environment and less need for lights in the first place.

But as the business grows, Spiros Assimacopoulos felt that reducing the environmental impact of the bakery was also important. “It makes good business sense, and it makes us a good neighbor,” he said.



Top: Three rollers reduce the dough sheet down to the desired thickness without imparting any stress on the dough.

Bottom: After cooling either on the spiral cooler or racks, buns and other products move into the packaging department to be polybagged.

facility because it inherited the previous tenant’s thermal oil piping. “That infrastructure is typically very expensive, but they had already installed it,” Spiros Assimacopoulos said. “Using thermal oil, which is radiant heat with no turbulence, really sets our product apart.” Four Daub heat exchangers prepare the oil and circulate it back into the oven. The heated oil flows through the baking surfaces, creating a consistent baking temperature throughout.

After baking, product is either depanned automatically and cooled at ambient temperature on an IJ White spiral cooler or left on racks to cool in the packaging department. “With only one spiral right now, we’re doing a lot of rack cooling, which is labor intensive,” Spiros Assimacopoulos said. With the extra 12,000 sq ft, Michigan Bread will stretch out its production to accommodate a second cooling tower for two straight full production lines.

After cooling, bread is polybagged on one of three UBE packaging lines. Currently, only one is automatically loaded, but that will soon change. Kwik Lok systems close the bags, which are then sent through a Mettler Toledo metal detector. Michigan Bread recently invested in Hartmann reciprocating slicers and baggers, which will slice up to 45 Detroit loaves per minute as opposed to slicing five to six loaves a minute as it does now.

Product set for broad-line distribution is palletized and driven to the offsite cold storage location. Fresh product is moved to the distribution department, George Assimacopoulos’s original business, where it’s staged with other vendors’ breads for delivery the next day. Drivers will arrive the next morning to deliver product along 20 routes to Michigan Bread’s 1,200 independent restaurant customers. The team is in the process of implementing a pick-to-light system to streamline warehouse management, which it hopes to have up and running early next year.

Ask Spiros Assimacopoulos what his plans are for the next five years, and he’ll give you his “generic” answer: “I’d like to maintain the brisk pace of growth and perfect everything from a quality and culture standpoint while executing the business model,” he noted.

But as he walks through the bakery, pointing out what’s new and what’s to come, it’s clear the future is anything but generic for Michigan Bread. This family is just getting started. ●