

Food

Supermarket naan taken to new level



Marion Kane

Dish

The ever-ebullient Jim White is doing a pretty good Peter Sellers-style imitation of his laid-back buddy and business partner Sam Ajmera — to the obvious amusement of both.

We're sitting in a Rosedale coffee shop. Jim is explaining how the two joined forces in the ambitious venture we're here to discuss — producing the Indian flatbread naan for Loblaws and muffins for Starbucks — after meeting by chance in 2004 at the Fancy Food Show in San Francisco.

"Sam said, 'The boys are bugging me to get into the bakery business,'" quips Jim, replicating his Bombay-born friend's accent almost perfectly.

This is received with affectionate grins from the latter's offspring Ojus, 30, and Tejus, 24, who were born and raised in Canada. "These are the future — Jim and I are the past," says Sam proudly, looking across the table piled high with naan and assorted muffins at the two handsome men seated opposite.

"One was supposed to go to law school," he continues, "and the other ran our specialty rice mill in Arkansas."

But when Ajmera and White recently teamed up to produce private-label muffins and naan on a huge scale under the umbrella of fgf brands — "It stands for Functional Gourmet Foods," says Sam of the biz that operates a huge manufacturing plant in Concord — both sons decided to join them. Ojus takes charge of sales and marketing; Tejus runs day-to-day operations.

"I've met Sam three times in my life in three successive careers," says the fast-talking Jim, whom readers of this paper may recall from his colourful stint



LUCAS OLENIUK / TORONTO STAR

Functional Gourmet Foods partners from left — jus Ajmera, his father, Sam Ajmera, and Jim White — say their goal is "food with a purpose." Their factory produces muffins exclusively for Starbucks as well as a tandoori naan bread made in a one-of-a-kind oven.

writing about food and restaurants for the *Star* in the early '80s.

It was in this capacity, "out looking for ethnic breads," that Jim discovered Sam and his brother Shreyas, owners at that time of a company called Dough Delight: bakers of bagels, croissants and pita bread. "They were 30 years ahead of their time," he says.

Jim and Sam became firm friends. When Jim left the *Star* to work for Loblaws, the pair worked together to produce the famous President's Choice pizza crust called Splendido. "It took us six months and was an overnight success," Jim says.

In 1997, Jim moved to the Napa Valley. Then came that chance meeting with Sam in San Francisco. Jim, never lost for words when it comes to promoting his latest passion, wants to

tell me more. "Ours is a Ben & Jerry's approach to baking," he enthuses. "Wholesome ingredients, minimal processing, nutrient-dense, superior-tasting muffins and flatbreads marketed with flair."

The name Ben & Jerry's comes up a few times. So do the words "all-natural, whole-grain, traditional and indulgent." Boasts Jim, "We already sold to Whole Foods across the United States."

He insists it's a labour of love. "We're doing this because we want to, not because we have to," he says. "We want to create better foods for people." Turning over his business card, he points to the company credo: "Food with a purpose."

Jim and Sam are particularly proud of their latest creation: a pomegranate bran muffin. Biting into this chewy, not-too-sweet, item, I'm impressed.

Citing the blueberry version, Jim repeats his mantra about their muffins being all-natural. "Ours are made with wild blueberries," he explains, "not apple skin dyed like blueberries or synthetic blueberries made of hydrogenated oil."

Maybe Ojus notices that I look miffed-out or perhaps he just wants to talk about his pet project. "The naan is key," he says, quickly gaining my full attention as I'm a long-time fan of Indian food.

"Indian food has become very popular," Ojus rightly says, "But there was no naan to be seen on supermarket shelves. Some people make pita in this shape and call it naan."

Authentic naan, he continues, is made with eggs, ghee (clarified butter), buttermilk, flour and a little yeast. It's traditionally baked in the tandoor oven, an

ancient way of baking flatbreads used in several ethnic cuisines.

The challenge of producing commercially baked naan was daunting. The complicated research and development process took about a year.

"It was as much process-driven as ingredient-driven," Ojus begins. "We eventually developed the world's first commercial tandoor. We tasted naan here and in India, then took several restaurant tandoor ovens apart to understand how they work."

The result, chimes in Jim, is "a charcoal-fired hot box that reaches a very high heat. Its interior is clay and the wind comes through it to create a chimney effect." The naan cooks in 35 seconds, "singes with charred parts" for that distinctive crisp texture and is peeled off the oven with a hot poker.

Using an authentic recipe, they wrestled, says Ojus, with "how to maintain the particular soft texture and special flavour of naan after manufacturing, distributing and freezing it." Then it's a matter of "heat-and-eat" for the consumer.

I bought some of their President's Choice naan at my local Zehr's and chowed down on a yummy batch reheated in my toaster oven along with saffron rice and homemade chicken curry. It was excellent.

Here's a dish that's a staple at the Ajmera home: a delicious version of a simple curry. They suggest serving it with rice and, of course, naan.

Chickpea Curry

✓ Star Tested

Chana masala is a ground spice mix of dried mango, pomegranate, chiles, cinnamon, cloves and cumin sold in Indian food stores like House of Spice in Kensington Market or grocery shops in Little India. The Ajmeras don't recommend substituting garam masala, which is easier to find, but I did, with good results. Substitute about 6 canned tomatoes for fresh, if desired.

2 tbsp vegetable oil
1 tsp cumin seeds
1 onion, chopped
2 large tomatoes, chopped
1 tbsp grated fresh ginger root
2 tbsp chana masala
19-oz/540 mL can chickpeas, drained, rinsed
2 cups water
1/2 cup chopped fresh coriander

PREPARATION: In large skillet, heat oil over medium heat. Add cumin seeds; toast until aromatic, about 30 seconds. Add onion; cook until golden brown, about 10 minutes. Add tomatoes and ginger root; cook about 5 minutes. Add chana masala, chickpeas and water; cook, stirring occasionally, until mixture thickens, about 10 minutes. Add coriander.

Makes about 2 to 4 servings.

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