



Spice is Still Nice – After 37 Years



Photo: Lisa Silber



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The Vanns Spices company sources spices from all over the world

Look out, McCormick! For almost four decades, Vanns Spices has been offering lively competition for the Baltimore spice giant. Now employee owned, Vanns also welcomes a new CEO, Nick Ciotti.

First, some interesting history. Vanns Spices was founded in 1981 by “Spice Queen” Ann Wilder and a friend, cooking instructor Virginia Limansky. The moniker “Vanns” combines the partners’ first names. The two began mixing their own spices and hawking them at church bazaars and other food-oriented events. Pretty soon, they began selling their products to Maryland grocers, such as Graul’s and Eddie’s Market.

In 2006, the women sold their company — which was pulling in annual revenues of \$3 to \$4 million — to investment partners. Ann used some of her profits to help husband Rob Wilder start Wilder Foods, Inc., which sold high-end spices wholesale. A self-taught gourmet cook and member of Les

Dames d’Escoffier, Ann continued consulting for the Wilder company until her death in 2009. (As a fellow Dame, I was acquainted with Ann, a delightful and very accomplished woman.) Vanns Spices is still going strong under Ciotti, who had already been with the company for 10 years. He took the helm after Mick Whitlock retired last year. Vanns also became an ESOP, meaning the employees own the company.

“It’s new and exciting...”

Ciotti told *Foodservice Monthly*. “We carry hundreds of spices, spice blends, and extracts, sourced from all over the world. We have them ground and processed (stateside), so we can offer the freshest product possible. It also assures quality and food safety. It’s important to avoid contamination and adulteration, for example, grinding up cumin with peanut shells!” That can sometimes happen overseas, he notes, where there’s little control. “We also make our own signature blends for restaurants, such as barbecue rubs

and crab blends,” added Ciotti, the latter being essential in the crab-crazy Baltimore area.

Vann’s “fastest rising” products are Za’atar (a Mediterranean/Middle Eastern mix which includes sesame seeds and sumac), Raz el Hanout (a zesty Moroccan blend), and berbere (the Ethiopian mix). Italian seasonings and lemon pepper are long-time favorites.

“About 95 percent of our business is private blending,” Ciotti explained. “We custom mix spices for restaurants and other food services, which, in turn, place their own labels on the bottles.” Most Vanns bottles contain four ounces, and the company also carries gourmet salts and peppers in their own grinders. Vanns customers include Eddie’s Market (Baltimore), Whole Foods, Rodman’s, and Common Market Co-Op in Frederick, Md., plus wholesale distributors such as Metropolitan Poultry, Belair Produce, and Fells Point Meats.

Vanns Spices CEO Nick Ciotti

Advice for would-be spice merchants?

“It’s well worth it to investigate your sources and to make sure they are transparent,” Ciotti emphasized. “It’s vital to investigate your supply chain for food safety. We use a third-party-audited facility to make sure products are safe.”

“Also, compare spices from different sources. Is the product bright? Take a whiff. Is it fresh smelling, not old or musty? Another key factor in choosing a supplier is to work with someone who will let you into their facility. So many spice houses are not willing to show you their operation, so you have to wonder what they are hiding. Go to your suppliers. See their facility. Talk with the purchasers and other workers to make sure they are bringing you the best product available.”

VANNS SPICES is located at 1716 Whitehead Road, Gwynn Oak, Md 21207. For more information, call 410-944-3888 or visit www.vannsspices.com.