

Passion for Pasta

Country Pasta in Polson and Great Northern Pasta In Whitefish

One is a lifelong Montana resident, graduate of Polson High School and Montana State University, the other a computer software engineer from Georgia Tech who moved to Whitefish in 2008. Like so many of us from different backgrounds who find ourselves living in the Flathead, Heather Knutson and Jeff Russell share a common passion – theirs is making great pasta.

COUNTRY PASTA, POLSON

Heather Knutson began cutting and bagging pasta by hand when she was a student at Polson High School. Today, in an unassuming building off U.S. Highway 93 north of Polson, she is the general manager at Country Pasta, which last year shipped 2.5 million pounds of pasta all across the country.

The recipe for Country Pasta is simple: durum wheat, real eggs, water and sea salt. It was the recipe her mother Linda used when she made pasta at her home. Heather believes the core of the company's success is using

New products are on the horizon for Country Pasta in Polson.





the finest ingredients available, regardless of trends and commodity prices. Country Pasta built its brand over the last 23 years and is trusted for consistent and superior quality. The plant is immaculate and employs new technology. Heather, who was recently elected mayor of Polson, believes the secret to great pasta is in the raw ingredients and the drying. Her grandfather and dad worked hard on that process and the entire team takes great pride in the product.

Heather is in many ways her father's child. Dean Knutson came to Polson from North Dakota to work in a lumber mill. He soon started Polson Paint and Glass and became the first franchisee for the Oregon-based Earth Stove, one of the first wood stoves on the market and a parts supplier to the firm. He sold the stove business in the early 1980s and did government contracting work until 1988. In 1989, he sold off his equipment and decided to make pasta full-time at the same location. "Dad and I would eat dinner at the Rancho Deluxe Restaurant and talk about how our pasta was going to be sold all over the country," Heather said, laughing.

The whole family has worked in business in one capacity or another over the years. But Heather was tapped to lead the company when her father passed away at 60. The company was sold several years ago to a couple that valued its product, culture, history and commitment to Polson, and Heather stayed on as manager. Country Pasta employs 20 people and counts among its customers Sam's Club, Costco, Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger, Associated Food Stores and Super Value. The business is seasonal and the pasta is hearty, made for cool evenings. Heather's favorite way to prepare the pasta is with a little butter and salt. Her mom Linda's beef stroganoff is her favorite recipe, although the customer favorite seems to be Linda's tuna casserole.

And new products are on the horizon of the company. It acquired Tipu's Chai Tea several years ago, which also began as a sacred family recipe. To learn more about Country Pasta's story and products, and to find recipes, visit www.countrypasta.com.

GREAT NORTHERN PASTA, WHITEFISH

Jeff Russell ran a software company from 1994 to 2007. He vacationed in Whitefish and never shook the idea of living there. So he exited his software business and took a

leap of faith. He has always been a foodie, enjoying the restaurants in Atlanta where he lived. He contemplated, like so many, how he was going to make a living in Montana. He was drawn to food for many reasons, and the fact that Montana raises exceptional durum wheat led him to pasta. He is an engineer and the equipment intrigued him as well.

In 2010 he began with one Italian-made machine, making and selling fresh pasta in the railroad district in Whitefish. His shop,



Great Northern Pasta relocated to Baker Avenue in Whitefish earlier this year.

Great Northern Pasta, also sells other food items that complement fresh pasta. His shelves hold great sauces, olives, a large selection of vinegars and olive oil, cheeses and, of course, an excellent wine selection. Great Northern specializes in a fresh artisan pasta product. The coolers carry fettuccini, delicious goat cheese raviolis, butternut squash ravioli, angel hair and spinach fettuccini.

Great Northern Pasta relocated to Baker Avenue in Whitefish early this year. Jeff craves a sense of place. As we spoke, customers wandered in and out almost non-stop. He likes to talk with customers and understand what draws them to products. He helped a woman on the way home to Missouri pack her fresh pasta for the trip. "Just put it in your checked bag; it will make the trip fine that way." The store is like a kitchen or living room with a glass wall so you can see the entire pasta-making process going on in the back. He runs two businesses, one a retail operation and the other a wholesale business. A marketing veteran has now become a partner. He has brokered deals with FSA and Quality Foods distribution. The company has gone through a branding process and expanded its product lines both on the retail and wholesale side. Company sales now are about 40 percent retail and 60 percent food service.

Jeff gives the Montana Department of Agriculture (particularly Angie Nelson) high marks in working with him on his business. Their help enabled him to attend the Natural Products Retail Show this year. He was surprised by the assistance he has received from the state.

He is working on innovations in packaging that will give his products longer shelf life, as well as flash-freezing methods that will ensure the pasta's delicious taste and texture. The staff serves as taste testers for new products. Jeff insists that pasta is really easy: flour, water and eggs. His eggs are grown locally in Ronan.

Where does he want to be in five years? "I had to answer that question when I was raising money from VC's too often. Let's just say I want to be in the Flathead Valley making pasta and wherever else life takes me." Visit Great Northern Pasta at 235 Baker Avenue in Whitefish and at www.gnpasta.com. ■



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