

THE GLOBE AND MAIL



Fred Lam / The Globe and Mail

MR. GOUDAS: Peter Goudas is a food importer. He specializes in ethnic foods. He imports and sells more than 360 products.

Catering to Canada's growing ethnic diversity

GRAIG McINNES March 23 1993

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*Catering to Canada's
growing ethnic diversity*

GRAIG McINNES

HOUSEHOLD NAME

*Entrepreneur Peter Goudas arrived
in Toronto as a penniless immigrant.*

*Today, he is cashing in on a
market he helped foster as a
purveyor of exotic food products
from around the world.*

*Twenty-six years later, Peter
Goudas still recalls the cold spring
of Canada's centennial year and his
first days in a new land.*

*He was sleeping on the streets
around Toronto City Hall while he
looked for work and was surviving
on the few dollars he picked up
washing cars in the parking lot
under Nathan Phillip Square.*

*Mr. Goudas was 25 that May,
just off the boat from Greece
by way of Halifax and Montreal.*

*By the time he got to Toronto,
his money was gone.*

*He had no friends here, no family
and only a few phrases of English,
yet he counted on landing on
his feet – and he did.*

*“When you are young, you think
always in a positive way, yeah?” he
reflects in a voice that still carries*

*a strong reminder of his native
Greece.*

*“If I had to come now, maybe I
would never do it.”*

*Mr. Goudas' story is the classic tale
of an immigrant made good.*

*He came with nothing, he worked
hard and he prospered.*

But his story is more than a cliché.

*For this is an immigrant
who found a way to profit from
immigration, an entrepreneur who
saw the changing face of Canada as
an opportunity instead of a threat.*

*Mr. Goudas, sells food.
He came to a land of meat and
potatoes and saw a market for ackee
and rice, for black-eyed peas,
for cassava and pepper sauce.*

*His company, Goudas Food
Products and Investments Ltd.,
tapped into what was then
a relatively small market for
ethnic foods.*

*He helped to foster it and now
is reaping the benefits as the
market burgeons.*

*Not only do new immigrants
continue to bring new tastes to this
country, but white-bread Canadians
are eager to incorporate exotic
foods to their diet.*

*“Canadians are more educated
about ethnic taste than any
nationality in the world”*

Mr. Goudas says.

According to the 1991 census, there

are at least 4.3 million immigrants in Canada, about 16 per cent of the population.

While that figure has remained relatively constant since that late 1940s, the face of immigration has changed considerably.

In 1961, 90 percent of the immigrants to Canada were from Europe.

During the 1980's that figure had dwindled to 25 per cent as Canada ended restrictive regulations that had effectively shut out the rest of the world.

In Toronto alone, many ethnic communities have grown to the size of small towns or even small cities.

In 1991, 175,000 people in Toronto said their mother tongue was Chinese, second only to the 189,000 who listed Italian. There were almost 37,000 Filipinos, 19,000 Tamils and Vietnamese and 32,000 who spoke Punjabi.

Immigrants have also concentrated in Vancouver and Montreal and to a lesser extent in other Canadian cities.

All of these people have brought with them a taste for native foods, many of which were not available in Canada when they arrived.

There are no hard numbers available for the size of the market, partly because there is no firm definition of ethnic food.

But it is large enough that Canadian farmers and manufacturers are starting to want in, according to Brian Sundue of the consumer analysis section of Agriculture Canada's food industry development division, who recently embarked on a study of the market for ethnic foods.

Some foods aimed at the ethnic market, such as yellow peas, are grown in Canada, Mr. Goudas says.

However, the Canadian climate is too harsh for many of the items. An experimental crop of black-eyed peas failed "when winter came two weeks early."

Among the ethnic cuisines most popular with native-born Canadians is Mexican.

"I recently saw that salsa now outsells ketchup here in Alberta, which would have been unheard of just a few years ago," says Jim Waters, vice-president for public affairs at Canada Safeway Ltd., which has 235 stores in Western Canada.

Canadians traveling abroad also bring home a taste for more exotic foods.

"Canadians are losing their conservative image," says Roderick Chung, president of Grace, Kennedy (Ontario) Inc., a subsidiary of Grace, Kennedy & Co. Ltd. Of Jamaica that has been operating in the Canadian market since 1984.

Like Mr. Goudas's company,

Grace, Kennedy has done most of its advertising in the ethnic press of Canada.

But it has started a campaign to move some of its products, including hot pepper sauce, jerk seasoning and canned corned beef, into the mainstream market.

The market for ethnic food has evolved just as the nature of immigration has changed from the more familiar European to cultures more foreign to the Canadian mainstream.

When pasta and perogies were once considered exotic, Canada's new ethnic communities have created a vastly expanded market for foods previously unknown to the Canadian palate.

"You want what your mother made," Mr. Goudas says between bites of spanakopita (spinach pie), calamari (squid), octopus and meatballs in a Greek restaurant just north of Metro Toronto near his office.

This is the 51-year-old food merchant's maternal cuisine, but he does not merely sell ingredients to make the dishes his mother made. In fact, the Mr. Goudas line has no Greek specialty products.

Instead, his products appear chameleon-like, to be the native food of dozens of other cultures, whether as glutinous rice for the Chinese market, with his name spelled out in chopsticks, or the Jamaican colors of red, yellow and green on his red-hot pepper sauce.

To serve the evolving ethnic market, Mr. Goudas has had to learn the secrets of mothers around the world.

In his warehouse, the results of his education await shipment to stores across Canada.

He sells 360 products and employs about 50 people in Canada.

There is basmati rice from India, scented rice from Thailand, parboiled rice from Arkansas, lima beans from Peru, chickpeas from Mexico, tomatoes from Argentina, coconut cream from Sri Lanka and sardines from Thailand, Japan, Korea and Maine.

He works out of a small, functional office carved out of one corner of the warehouse. There, behind a cheap wood-grain desk, he sits with his computer, telephone, calculator and heavily stained plastic ashtray and deals in the world market.

Mr. Goudas red pepper sauce for example, is manufactured in Jamaica. The labels are printed in the United States. The bottles come from Costa Rica, the peppers are grown in Jamaica and the sauce is bottled there.

The bottles are packed in cartons from the United States and go by ship to Elizabeth, N.J., and from there by truck to Canada, where more than a million bottles a year are sold.

While production is a matter of logistics, knowing what to produce is more of an art.

Mr. Goudas's background was in engineering. Soon after arriving in Toronto, he landed a job with a company that had an overseas contract and needed someone who was used to working in the metric system.

After three years, he had saved enough to buy a small factory, where he started packaging rice under the name Mr. Goudas.

Rice is still one of his most important products.

He says he sells 20 varieties and ships more than 400 tonnes a week.

The ethnic landscape is still evolving. Mr. Goudas says.

Each culture represents an individual market, with distinctive tastes and ingredients that have to be analyzed and reproduced.

According to a study of the Canadian specialty-food industry by Peat Marwick Stevenson & Kellog, 90 per cent of new products introduced to the market fail within the first year.

Mr. Goudas says that hasn't happened to him because he makes sure there is a market for them before they are produced.

These are the details that matter to a business that caters to the differences among Canadians.

"We live in a multicultural society whether we like it or not,"

Mr. Goudas says.

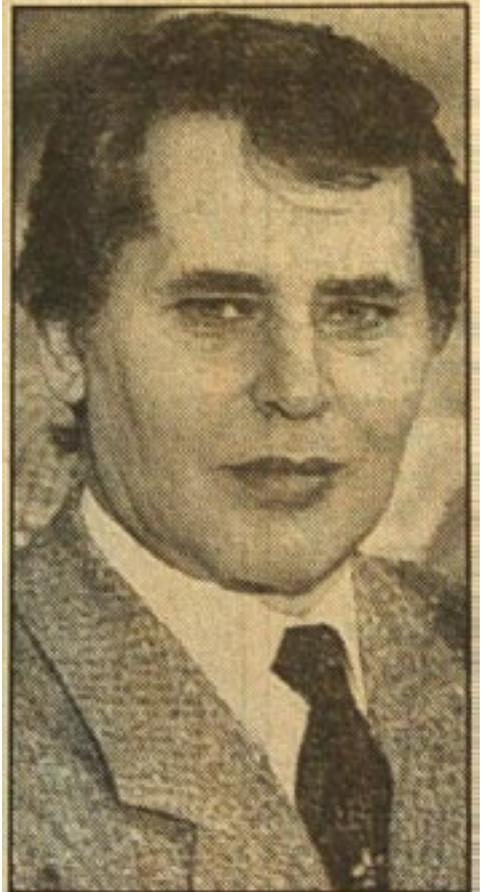
"I like it."

This article was featured in

THE GLOBE AND MAIL, seven months prior to when Mr. Goudas won the entrepreneur of the year award 1993.

We asked Mr. Goudas what he thought about this article, he mentioned that according to Mr. McInnes, he landed on his feet, but according to him, he landed on his behind.

Everything else about the article is good, especially the sentence that states "knowing what to produce is more of an art". Mr. McInnes knows well about the meaning of this sentence, but Mr. Goudas wonders, how many people really do know!



Peter Goudas