

A DAY IN THE LIFE

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PHOTOGRAPHY BY ROTH AND RAMBERG

This Alberta couple is proving that spicy ethnic cuisine belongs on the plates of mainstream North Americans

AN APPETITE FOR





How did Sherwood Park become known as the samosa capital of North America? And what is a samosa anyway?

Those are two of the biggest questions whirling about Alberta's food-processing industry, where a three-year-old company is writing the first chapters of an incredible business success story based squarely on a food most of its target market had never even heard of, that is, until Noorudin and Anis Jiwani decided to take a cultural food icon – the East Indian samosa – and make it mainstream.

THE LAND OF OPPORTUNITY

In 1999, Noorudin Jiwani wrote the Government of Alberta what he calls “a blind e-mail.” An actuary well-accustomed to dealing with numbers, Jiwani and his wife, an administrative dietician, wanted to move to Alberta from Ontario to launch a brand-new food company that would eventually sell a full line of East Indian dishes, “right from starters to desserts.” Under that plan, their trademarked line of Chef Bombay products, each of them freshly frozen for the food services and grocery markets, would be synonymous with high-quality East Indian food. Factoring in quick cooking times, Chef Bombay promised time-strapped consumers the kind of great-tasting convenience widely sought in oven-ready meals.

FOR

SAMOSAS



According to that plan, Chef Bombay would hit the appetizer market first and make three kinds of samosas, vegetable, chicken and beef (all of which can be served as entrees, too). Unlike the mom-and-pop operations that serve local Muslim markets in the nation's biggest centres, the Jiwanis wanted to make thousands of the phylo-pastry-wrapped delicacies every day. And that posed some business dilemmas. First, the machine they needed didn't even exist. They also needed help converting a family-sized recipe perfected by Anis into one that would make hundreds of samosas – every one of them folded into a plump, hand-sized triangle bursting with East Indian flavours heavily infused with cilantro and onions. Of critical importance to the company's long-term strength, those thousands of samosas needed to reach export markets in the U.S. That meant that their Alberta processing operation would have to meet the strict standards of an international food safety program called HACCP (Hazard Analysis Critical Control Points), a fact that also demanded outside expertise in their plant's design and construction. Determined to treat every obstacle as a speed bump, slowing down when they needed and zooming ahead when they could, the couple had one simple question for Alberta Agriculture, Food & Rural Development (AAFRD): “Can you help?”

It's the kind of question Allan Pelletier used to deal with almost every day. A development officer with AAFRD in the late 1990s, Pelletier liked the Jiwanis' plan – and enthusiasm. Taking one speed bump at a time,

Pelletier helped the couple make the right Alberta contacts.

By late 1999, the Jiwanis and their daughters (now ages 14 and 16) were residents of Sherwood Park, and their plan for an international samosa business was on the front burner. On one side of the business pot, the Food Processing Development Centre at Leduc provided technical support on the recipes and helped them subdue traditional samosa flavours for a North American palate. On another, AAFRD's Pelletier assisted with everything from market development to product pricing. To the Jiwanis' elation, the Agriculture Financial Services Corporation (AFSC) also came aboard to finance the world's

building that houses Aliya's Foods), "We gave product away by the boxful," recalls Jiwani, shaking his head at the memory. Applying the same personal approach to area restaurants, they slowly earned a tasty reputation via box-by-box sales.

The rest is history. By March of 2001, Chef Bombay was regular deli fare at Costco stores in eastern Canada. With HACCP certification, U.S. markets opened a month later, and today Chef Bombay is a supermarket staple in most Alberta groceries. The firm also produces private-label products for several companies, and the products are with every major food-service supplier in the country. "Initially, we were taking any business that came our way. Eventually we had to

But the off-season for samosa consumption means the Jiwanis have time to pump up the company's quest to maintain market dominance. This spring, they'll hit grocery stores and food-service companies with a new entree product under the Chef Bombay logo. They'll also promote their samosas for the trendy fusion market.

Primed to increase their current production space to more than 11,000 square feet, Aliya's Foods expects this year's sales to continue its upward climb. Never one to stick with a plan that's not working, Noorudin Jiwani concedes a steep learning curve. "We made more than one mistake," he says, "but every setback was a step forward in our business education."

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first samosa-making machine, a unit sourced and developed in the Far East.

Determined to speed up HACCP certification, another side of the business development pot stewed along with the support of the Canadian Food Inspection Agency. Its specialists guided the couple through a labyrinth of regulations governing everything from freezer and prep-room temperatures to ventilation and product flow. (HACCP provides a point-by-point protection of food safety. It also ensures every finished product can be linked back to specific ingredients.)

Once the machine was in place and production began, the Jiwanis and a full-time salesman hit the streets, literally giving away hundreds of samples. Their first sale, a whopping \$65 in product to Edmonton's Petroleum Club, came through in December of 1999. Reaching out to businesses involved with their other partners (a family-owned construction company that also owns the

start selecting what market we wanted to be in," recalls Jiwani, flashing his trademark smile.

ONE EYE ON THE FUTURE

"They started with a good product and a vision," says Milt Lanes, a commercial account manager with AFSC, which works with small businesses in the agri-industry sector. "They always knew they had to go beyond the domestic market – and they were willing to do the work to make that happen. It was ambitious, but they targeted a growing market, and we recognized this is the kind of business that deserves support."

That forward-ho approach still guides Aliya's Foods. During the peak season that runs from July to December, the company's payroll jumps to 27, including management. Working a double shift, they produce up to 24,000 samosas a day. From January to June, production drops to 14,000 samosas a day and the payroll to 18 or 20 people.

And what's the #1 thing that the Jiwanis did right? Location. Location. Location. "Alberta's been very good to us," says Anis. In addition to technical help from AAFRD, some financial assistance from AFSC, and the chance to use Alberta-grown products ranging from canola to potatoes and onions, the couple discovered in Alberta a pioneering attitude that they hadn't expected. Today, they're targeting California and other pockets of the US market where sheer population creates enormous volume opportunities.

"It was great working for someone else. I used to sleep better," says Noorudin, "but there has never been one day that I haven't wanted to be here." Anis agrees. Still in charge of product R&D and ever-concerned with producing a superior product, she's confident that Aliya's Foods will continue to take the lead on top-quality East Indian cuisine. "I always knew this is what I wanted to do." ●