



MANUFACTURING

Rising to the Top

With a new multimillion-dollar facility and fresh demand developing nearly overnight, Pittsfield Rye and Specialty Breads Company has no time to loaf around

WRITTEN BY AMANDA RAE BUSCH
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JASON HOUSTON

Rick and Renée Robbins are on a roll. Literally. Before beginning a Saturday afternoon tour of their new 11,000-square-foot production facility for Pittsfield Rye and Specialty Breads Company at 1010 South Street, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, the couple apologizes again for repeated rescheduling. Yesterday's agenda encompassed a whirlwind sales expedition to Montvale, New Jersey, then Boston, and back, which left just enough time for them to catch their breaths in the frosty February air. As hoped, the relocation from their original, albeit cozy, East Street space in September 2007 is proving valuable already. While some say that man cannot live on bread alone, for these Berkshire natives it's their sole source of sustenance.

The "cutting" at the A&P headquarters in the Garden State—at which Pittsfield Rye was one of six finalist bakers from the Northeast—earned them a "preliminary thumbs up." Within a week they'll find out if they're chosen to create rye bread for all of the chain's stores in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut, which would boost their current annual wholesale production of about two million loaves by more than 700,000 units. "We'll need a whole 'nother crew," says Rick, the company's president, with the slightest twinge of trepidation in his voice. "That would be working around the clock."

From the day he purchased the family business on East Street from his father, Amie Robbins, in 2002, the third-generation baker Rick had his eye fixed on the future. "There was no more room for growth," he laments, speaking as much to the previous site's physical footprint (8,000 square feet on two floors, with no additional land) as to the limited opportunities emblematic of small-time retail bakery.

Ironically, economic expansion required a downsizing of sorts. Rick and Renée immediately sliced away Pittsfield Rye's production of cakes, cookies, pastries, and pies, for which the shop had earned local acclaim. They opted to focus on the bakery's namesake rye bread and rolls, adding about a dozen specialty breads over the next few years. And most notably, they nixed the retail aspect of the shop—a tough decision, but ultimately a wise one, due to the glass-fronted shop's notoriously dicey location on a corner of the five-way intersection at East and Elm streets. Pittsfield Rye and Specialty Breads, with a tweaked name and a new logo, went wholesale, targeting restaurants, supermarkets, and the food service industry.

Now, in its new space overlooking Route 7—the former wholesale warehouse for Guido's Fresh Marketplace, just a stone's throw away—Pittsfield Rye primarily manufactures loaves and rolls (frozen raw, baked, or par-baked) for wholesale customers spanning eight states on the East Coast from Maine to Maryland. The largest and longest-standing (of fifteen years) client, Big Y Foods, comprises fifty-seven branches in Massachusetts and Connecticut alone; in addition to stocking rye and specialty breads, such as the all-



natural, 100 percent whole-wheat twelve-grain and Farmer's Bread, Pittsfield Rye formulated Big Y's trademark La Crosta Italian loaf. Add to that supplying an abundance of restaurants and resorts within Berkshire boundaries—Pittsfield's Hot Dog Ranch, Mazzeo's, Jimmy's, and Bousquet's Tamarack Lodge, and Lenox's Cranwell—and you've got an empire in the baking.

"It's a different philosophy and business altogether from our past generations," Rick, 42, says of the place his Brooklyn-bred grandfather Charlie founded in 1929. "We wanted to make fewer items and make them more efficiently."

Situated on fourteen acres and representing a total investment of more than \$2 million, the single-floor complex is a bastion of efficiency in which state-of-the-art upgrades sit comfortably alongside beloved, time-tested machines. In anticipation of a big move, the Robbinses started accumulating new equipment upon acquiring the company, such as the towering five-deck oven purchased a few years ago.

"Very simply, this is the best baking that there is, by far," says Rick, patting

the handle of the stainless-steel behemoth at one end of the cavernous space. Unlike a rack oven, it eschews parchment-lined pans to bake loaves right on a cornmeal-dusted hearth. "Because you're baking right on the stone, the dough touches that [heat source] for a more even crust all the way through."

Since many of Pittsfield Rye's goods require steam, imparting a glossy, firm, and especially crisp crust, it's doubly advantageous that the steaming mechanism can be controlled separately in each of the deck oven's five compartments. Rick hoists a baked loaf to a vertically sliding canvas conveyer belt to demonstrate how rows of proofed, raw dough are transported to the chambers for thirty-minute baking cycles. An arrangement, he explains, that achieves a baker's ultimate triumph: *consistency*.

The upgrade also boasts green properties. "We did research, and every bakery that bought a deck oven compared to the rotating oven saved over *fifty percent* in energy," Rick raves. The new oven shortens each baking cycle, leaving more moisture in the product, which translates into a longer shelf-life. "Not only do you get a better bake, but you can help justify

your costs with the energy savings."

Nearly every decision the couple made in outfitting the building was with its environmental impact in mind. Pittsfield Rye was approved for the Small Business Energy Advantage Program with Western Massachusetts Electric, which paid 35 percent toward retrofitting the facility's light bulbs and replacing its fan motors. Additionally, the heat emitted by massive freezer compressors outside of the building is reclaimed and redistributed back into the building.

Fortuitously, Guido's had used much of the building as a giant cooler, so evaporators were already in place for necessary climate control in the dough-production area. The couple built a new cooler and freezer and turned their old storage freezer from East Street into a blast freezer. Rick runs a finger along the translucent-black CoolTrol interfaces that monitor the seven evaporators inside the blast freezer. "When we take dough out to pack it, in the early morning, we do that for about an hour and the door's always opening and closing—we have forty racks, but can only move two or three at a time—there's a lot of wasted energy." He points to a big red button

RENÉE AND RICK ROBBINS
AT PITTSFIELD RYE AND
SPECIALTY BREADS COMPANY



that automatically shuts off the constant *whoosh* of cold air for twenty minutes. He smiles, "This will not let you do that for more than forty minutes total, so you can't ruin your product."

"It's pretty much our dream to be in a new building with new equipment, to be in this position," Rick continues. "That being said, it comes with a price tag."

Investing in new equipment and technology wasn't cheap. And the building itself rang up at \$658,000, financed by Greylock Federal Credit Union and helped in part by a \$100,000 small business loan from the Pittsfield Economic Revitalization Corporation (PERC), stipulating that the company create at least ten new jobs over the next five years. The \$2 million total also includes ownership of the old space, which the couple is actively trying to sell. "You can put that in print for sure," Rick notes wryly. "There's a building for sale at 502 East Street! Eight thousand square feet! Great location!"

Oddly, from the "bread line" at the center of the cavernous space, an important element seems strikingly absent: *flour*.



Renée scrambles ahead to a far-flung room to proudly present her *absolute favorite* piece of equipment: a custom-built, American-made silo that might hold 75,000 pounds of unbleached, un-bromated flour at any given moment. Though the system is not yet certified by the American Institute of Baking, Rick and Renée followed its standards to a T, using the special mesh filtration screens that require a stronger, more expensive aeration motor in order to “blow” fresh flour into the massive cistern from a piped-in tractor-trailer.

“However many pounds of flour you want, up to two hundred pounds, will come from the silo through these tubes to this weigh station right here,” says Rick, back at the central setup, pointing to a chute that swivels 360-degrees above the mixers. “It saves us a lot of labor—the guys don’t have to lug the hundred pound bags of flour over their shoulders, and it’s better for the environment: we don’t waste as many bags and use all the pallets.”

And, he adds, “We’re one of the only bakeries in America that has an oiling system.” He motions down the produc-

tion line to the tiny nozzle of an air compressor, set on a timer to release a single drop of oil onto the raw dough before it’s shaped, thus eliminating the need for ex-

cess flour. “Flour,” he declares, “it gets everywhere. It’s a big mess.”

The new ovens, freezers, flour silo, and now six loading docks (a big jump



How Rick and Renée Do It

What is your favorite productivity tool?

“GPS for our sales calls. We’re on the road a lot.”

What book had the greatest impact on you?

Tuesdays With Morrie by Mitch Albom

What music have you been playing lately?

Classic rock via satellite radio

What business publications do you read regularly and/or find most useful?

Baking Management magazine

What business-oriented websites do you regularly visit?

BakingBusiness.com

Is the family still involved with Pittsfield Rye?

“Ricky’s father is great with machinery, so anything we need fixing, he’s our man!,” says Renée. “It’s wonderful. Some of the newer, more technological stuff, he can’t necessarily do that, but [he fixes] all the older machinery.”

What Berkshire-based business do you most admire and why?

“Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort—very green.”

What’s the best part of being a husband-and-wife team?

“After the sales calls, we can go have a drink together, unwind ... ”

So sales calls are basically your vacations?

“Exactly!”



from a solo dock on East Street) all help to streamline Pittsfield Rye's process. "The bread business is growing rapidly," says Renée. "We anticipate putting another deck oven right there," she adds, pointing to the corner next to the five-deck oven, in which sits a dwarfed yellow forklift.

Pittsfield Rye products might be primarily in supermarkets, schools, and restaurants, but individual consumers can, and do, get their fix. When the couple began testing recipes—Kalamata Olive, Cinnamon "Burst," and Death By Chocolate among them, all of which must be made in batches of at least fifty loaves—on sales calls and in grocery stores, leftovers were abundant. Avid tasters wondered aloud how they could get their hands on just a couple of loaves at a time. So three years ago, Pittsfield Rye reopened its doors to the public, on Fridays and Saturdays from 9 a.m. to 2 p.m., dubbing it the Farmer's Bread Market. Hence the retail space at the building's main entrance, as



TAKEAWAY

TAKE NOTES:

In baking, consistency is important, which means checking ingredients and checking the process.

A GOOD LAYOUT EQUALS EFFICIENCY:

The Robbinses designed [the new space] so that when the bread came off the production line there was a flow to the cooler or to the blast freezer.

BE PASSIONATE:

Rick Robbins believes that everybody should want to be the best at what they do.

the company hopes to “get our name out in the community more as *artisan bread*.”

Concerning local competition, Pittsfield Rye is seemingly in its own class. “Well, we’re set up differently,” says Rick. “No matter what bakery you go to in Berkshire County, nobody has a freezer like we do, and that enables us to sell outside the area. They’re not competing in that business.”

The following Thursday, Rick and Renée Robbins deliver the good news with wide grins:

Pittsfield Rye scored the A&P account. Immediately, they’ll hire additional staff (the company employs fourteen currently) and ramp up their rye bread production by 50 percent. They’re also gearing up for a three-day weekend tour, manning sampling stations at each of the eleven branches of the Long Island, New York-based Best Yet Markets—duties that undoubtedly transcend those of neighborhood bakers of generations past. “This is nearly a twenty-four-hour day,” Rick states.

It’s now nearly four p.m. and the phone is about to ring itself off the hook. It’s Jiminy Peak Mountain Resort, for which Pittsfield Rye not only provides the standard hamburger and hotdog rolls, but creates a unique, Tex-Mex baguette to accompany the resort’s hearty soups and chili. They call a brief time-out, during which Renée whispers to Rick: “For tomorrow? I can’t believe that: two hundred bread bowls!”

But they’ll make it happen. They moved the entire facility 3.1 miles in a single day, much of it themselves. They painted the walls—and floors—themselves, to the rhythms of classic rock. Renée even stenciled the parking lines in the lot outside of the retail space. Despite the intensity of doing it all themselves, of being both baker and businessman, Rick explains, “It’s nice to sell bread. People like bread. It’s healthy bread.” He pauses. “You’re either moving forwards or backwards, never staying the same. We couldn’t move forward on East Street, whereas here it’s a *world* of moving forward.” **BBQ**

Amanda Rae Busch is associate editor of Berkshire Living and a carbohydrate enthusiast.

THE RECIPE

PITTSFIELD RYE AND SPECIALTY BREADS CO.
1010 SOUTH ST.
PITTSFIELD, MASS.
413.443.9141
WWW.PITTSFIELDRYE.COM