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Corporate caterer expands with new niche

Elmsford's Crystal Spoon enters new markets, expands facilities

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Paul Ghiron was willing to take a risk based on the assumption that business would come.

At a time when turning a profit is more the exception than the rule, the former U.S. Air Force fighter pilot turned businessman has steadily grown his operation.



The president of the Crystal Spoon Corp., one of Westchester County's oldest corporate catering firms, has just completed a \$200,000 expansion, nearly doubling its office and kitchen production space to 10,958 square feet at the Cross Westchester Executive Park in Elmsford.

The transaction included an expansion of 5,158 square feet for eight years and a renewal of 5,800 square feet for four years and 10 months, according to Mack-Cali Realty Corp. Ghiron said a portion of the build-out costs were funded by the landlord after signing a long-term lease negotiation.

Just a year after Crystal Spoon Corp.'s launch of Top Chef Meals, a gourmet meal-delivery service for residents and institutions, Ghiron saw a 10 percent to 20 percent increase in business each month.

The 600 clients that now order Top Chef Meals to-go solidified his decision to dig his heels in and protect a growing niche.

"When I look at the cost base of moving somewhere else and being able to deliver to New York City, expanding here made sense," he said. "To be able to operate, like any other business owner, it's been a challenge. ...

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Sean Kerins, executive chef, Crystal Spoon Corp. Inset, Paul Ghiron, president, Crystal Spoon Corp.

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I'm in that right proximity zone that delivery can happen throughout the greater metropolitan area."

Catering to the office market

Ghiron began his career as a 13-year-old on the back of a bicycle for family business Execu-Lunch Inc., which was founded by his father in 1973. He fondly recalled delivering lunches to executives in Elmsford.

He then separated from the family business, serving in the military and ultimately switching gears to defense contract work in the late 1980s.

Around 1990, Ghiron's father offered him the opportunity to take over Execu-Lunch.

"It was that, coupled with the fact that the Berlin Wall had just come down and the defense industry really didn't look like a growth industry anymore," he said of his decision to rejoin the family business, which became Crystal Spoon in May 2005.

Execu-Lunch's prime focus was the corporate cafeteria.

"They were in all of the Robert Martin Co. corporate parks (acquired by Cali Realty Corp. for \$450 million in 1997) when I

joined back when I was in my 30s."

Making money in the corporate cafeteria arena was hit-or-miss.

"You're serving the two cheapest meals of the day when people want to spend the least amount of money, and people demand the same quality of a multi-star restaurant," he said. "It was difficult to be profitable in that realm. I saw an opportunity to have more margin and do better, high-quality food."

Avenue to the core business

That realization resulted in the transition to corporate catering, which became the core of his business.

"My plan is to retain market share," Ghiron said. "It has been contracting because of the downturn in the economy, but I've been fortunate to keep my sales about right where they were."

Regeneron Pharmaceuticals Inc. in Tarrytown, a Crystal Spoon client, hosts about five events per year and has not had to downgrade.

"We're going strong," said Anissa Williams, senior facilities coordinator. "Crystal Spoon is the type of caterer you know you don't have anything to worry about when they're plan-



Paul Ghiron in the freezer of Crystal Spoon.

ning the event." Williams shared her favorite Crystal Spoon culinary creations — short ribs and sweet potato chips.

Ghiron's direct-to-consumer business Top Chef Meals services homebound elderly and disabled clients with gourmet meals prepared by chefs who cut their teeth at venues like Marriott and Doubletree.

Custom-built American Refrigerator freezers at the expanded Elmsford facility make bulk production possible for institu-

tional accounts such as a Manhattan detention facility, Bright Horizons day care centers and nursing homes.

"My long-term goal is to expand even more here, and build a (U.S. Department of Agriculture) facility where we can ship throughout the country," Ghiron said. "People say, 'How do you expand in Westchester County where the tax base is so high?' You have to be savvy. You have to watch your costs carefully."