

FRESH IDEAS FOR INDUSTRY LEADERS

food & drink

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Nothing but the Finest

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Legendary Legacy

For more than three decades, Astra Foods has built a legacy of manufacturing high-quality Philly-style beef and chicken steaks. **By Eric Slack**



>> Since 1978, Astra Foods has been supplying high-quality Philly-style beef and chicken steaks to international, regional and local food chains and distributors.

Virtually everybody in America knows about the Philly steak, but the legends of the genre don't always get their due. One such company is Astra Foods, which has grown up in the heart of Philly steak country and today resides in a 100,000-square-foot facility on five acres in Upper Darby, Pa. The company manufactures high-quality Philly-style beef and chicken steaks and distributes its products to international, regional and local food chains and distributors.

Founded in 1978 by Greek-born immigrants Demos Vasiliou and Spiros Poulimenos, the success of Astra Foods is an illustration of the American Dream. Vasiliou and Poulimenos came to the United States as students and still own and operate the company today. They grew Astra Foods from a small start-up family company into one of the top meat manufacturing facilities in the United States after putting their business and engineering educational backgrounds to good use.

"The core of our people have been working for

us for a long time," Poulimenos says.

Known for Quality

Throughout its existence, Astra Foods has earned a reputation that spreads far beyond Philadelphia. It is considered among the leading names within its niche. Part of this is because of its first-class facility, which is outfitted to meet all sanitation requirements and USDA regulations, which ensures the quality, safety and consistency of its food.

Indeed, quality control is one of its top concerns. The Astra Foods facility is equipped with state-of-the-art hand print scanners at facility entrances and high-tech security cameras, both of which are a key part of controlling security risks. Inspection stations and

company profile

Astra Foods

www.astrafoods.com

Specialty: High-quality Philly-style beef and chicken steaks

HQ: Upper Darby, Pa.

Demos Vasiliou, co-founder and owner: "We only use the best ingredients, and we believe we have the best-quality Philly steak in the entire country."



>> Astra Foods has made significant investments in recent years to buy equipment that enhances the safety of its products.

metal detection technology on its production line help to ensure that hazardous non-food particles are kept out of its products.

Today, the company manufactures pre-portioned, ready-to-cook and fully cooked beef and chicken products. Sales come through foodservice distributors who then sell the products to retail operators and through chain businesses. The customer base for the company's foodservice and distributor sales includes everything from pizzerias, schools, restaurants, universities and diners to stadiums, cafeterias, military bases and healthcare facilities.

"We've always done foodservice, and we specialize in fast-food chains," Vasiliou says. "We also cater to private-label and special-formula customers where we tailor our products to customer needs as far as flavor profiles go. We also do special products for retail customers like supermarket chains."

Understanding customer needs and providing exceptional quality, service and affordability are defining characteristics for Astra Foods. It is how the company has

established so many successful relationships with distributors and why its products are seen by many as the gold standard for Philly-style beef and chicken steaks.

"Day in and day out, we strive to provide the customer with the best product and the best service at the best price," Vasiliou says. "That approach has worked for us, and unlike others, we won't downgrade our product quality just because of the economy. We are known for consistent quality."

Always Improving

In its manufacturing process, Astra Foods utilizes fresh, lean steer beef and 100 percent all-white chicken breast. Its raw beef and chicken products are available in an array of marinated or non-marinated options. The company's product lines include raw beef steaks, pre-cooked beef steaks, raw chicken steaks and pre-cooked chicken steaks.

"When it comes to fully cooked products, I think we can safely say that we produce more than any other Philly steak facility in the country," Poulimenos says.

"We are the only one as of now that has introduced the high-pressure processing equipment into our process."

Investing in high-pressure processing, or HPP, equipment is incredibly important to ensure the quality and safety of its products. This is especially important in an era when high-profile food scares and recalls have threatened industries.

The HPP equipment uses pressure to kill food-borne pathogens and other harmful microorganisms without introducing heat or chemicals in the process. Similar pieces of equipment are used by organizations such as Hormel and Cargill for lunchmeats.

For about the last three years, the company has been working with Avure Technologies, the company that sold and services Astra's HPP machines. Avure has been a global leader in applying high-pressure technology to industrial and consumer goods manufacturing for half a century.

In 2012, the company plans to take steps to go green. It is introducing new energy-efficient machinery and a fat recovery system that will help the environment. This will help improve the energy efficiency of its manufacturing process on the front-end while also reducing or reusing waste.

There can also be no denying the cheesesteak's popularity. "The product has the potential to be as popular as the hamburger," Poulimenos says. "The potential for growth and demand for the product is great."

"We use only domestic, fresh product, and we do not import beef from any other part of the world," Vasiliou adds. "We only use the best ingredients, and we believe we have the best-quality Philly steak in the entire country." **FD**