

## SPECIALTY MEATS



# STAYING NIMBLE THROUGH ADVERSITY

**Cola Foods** rose to the challenge during the pandemic

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Cola Foods Inc., a meat processor based in Cranston, RI, outside of Providence, has seen the evolution of the meat industry since it started business in 1958.

But something unknown kept their president and chief executive officer, John Colagiovanni, working the phones from home for the first few weeks of the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic. But home officing only worked for a short time.

"After two weeks at home, I couldn't handle it anymore. I said, 'that's it I've got to come in,'" John said.

With more than 40 years of running the meat operation, John is moving toward passing the family operation to his son, Gio Colagiovanni.

So Gio, currently the plant manager for Cola Foods, urged his father to stay home while he came in to maintain the in-person

operation. Gio kept things moving along while its stakeholders figured out how to handle this unprecedented situation.

"You get to know what kind of person you are when it happens. Put it this way, you're either going to snap to it, or you're just going to crumble," Gio said.

As cases began to rise around the Northeast, the entire team at Cola devised the protocols and precautions to keep their 28 workers safe. They shut down the building to all visitors, took temperatures of all employees that came to work – if anyone had symptoms, they quarantined for 14 days until they got a test reporting they were negative.

Every 25 minutes, designated Cola workers sanitized doorknobs and high-use surfaces. They provided sanitary kits to drivers to keep them healthy.

Photos: Cola Foods Inc.



Protocols have changed so much now that people are greeted at the front door via video camera instead of a receptionist behind a desk.

John understands the stress level is high at a fresh meat manufacturer during normal times, but the pandemic took it to another level.

"It's a very, very stressful environment. Every day the price is changing," John said. "And then with COVID, forget it, that was even more stressful. I mean, these guys were working 80 hours a week and that's unbelievable."

Even with all the tension, demand shot through the roof as Cola Foods was able to keep local store shelves stocked while other parts of the supply chain were slowing down due to major outbreaks.

At one point, the company went from selling about 500 cases of meat to local locations per week, up to to 2,000 cases.

"They had to fill up the case with something, and they were filling it up with our product because we didn't miss a beat," John said of the company's retail customers.

### **BUILDING ON SUSTAINED SUCCESS**

Cola Foods originally started as Lincoln Packing Co. back in the 1950s with John's father.

After slinging beef and sausage and breaking down cattle for the first 20 years on Canal Street in Providence, RI, Lincoln Packing moved over to its existing location.

In the next decade, the company expanded and even built a distribution center by the mid-1980s, selling a range of products including bologna, salami and cheeses.

The traditional meats that the company still cuts to this day include a variety of fresh beef, shaved steak and Italian sausage.

In 2007, the company was approached to sell the operation's distribution end to stop competing with distributors like Sysco and US Foods. John could then concentrate on producing quality foodservice, retail and private label products.

"Once I stopped competing with them, we were able to secure some more of that business," John said.

In August 2017, Lincoln Packing changed its name to Cola Foods with the acquisition of another local brand, Marcello Sausage. This

gave the meat manufacturer a larger retail footprint in the local market.

Essentially, anything that goes into foodservice is the Lincoln Packing brand; anything that is purchased at grocery stores or convenience stores is now the Marcello brand. There is also a Giovanni brand and private label brands available for other customer needs.

Although Cola scrambled to figure out market conditions during the COVID-19 pandemic, having a 50% foodservice business and 50% retail helped it adjust.

John also said that the company shut down for one day early in the first week of COVID-19. After that, for part of the pandemic, Cola ran six days a week, 13 hours a day.

What helped Cola's business was its ability to supply niche foodservice operators, like pizza parlors and sub shops. The demand, even in those locations, maintained throughout the shutdown. People were picking up their traditional pizza and sub sandwiches regardless of the restrictions.

"When they closed within the first four weeks, we felt it, but then it started to come back little by little because those people already had delivery down pat," John said of the foodservice business. "You know a white tablecloth place; you can't deliver a steak. It

At left: Father/son duo John and Gio Colagiovanni had to make some adjustments to their business because of the pandemic. Below: Cola Foods produces a variety of patties including chicken and traditional hamburger.







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**Cola Foods employs 28 workers. So far during the pandemic, the meat processor has only had to shut down for one day.**

just doesn't happen, but sub shops are used to delivering that way."

And at a time like this delivering for those customers also goes a long way. Gio talked about how important fielding calls from customers any day of the week is for their small business.

"Let's face it, at a small company like this, every customer matters to us," he said of their clients. "It's like we really care, you know, my father gets phone calls, I get phone calls. We all get phone calls on the weekend – on Saturday and Sunday. Even if it's 1 lb of sausage, somebody needs to do what's needed because it's all about the relationship you build. I can remember my dad telling me a long time ago, 'remember you're nothing without them' and that just always stuck in my head forever."

### UPDATED OPERATIONS

Cola Foods' operation consists of 10,000 square feet including their office space.

The company estimated that it produces about 9,000 lbs to 10,000 lbs of shaved steak a day and 2,000 lbs of sausage, including a variety of chicken sausage offerings.

"We've sold a tremendous amount of shaved steak from March through July and August. Even now we've shipped out a couple of truckloads and it's really not seasonally the time of the year for shaved steak," said Dave Meyer, head of business development for Cola Foods. "It's the time of year for grilling, but with shaved steak, it was a convenience item."

Meyer explained that shaved steak, especially, was comfort food for people even though the summer months are usually reserved for having hamburgers and hot dogs.

"Now we're really coming into that time of the year from like September to March, so hopefully we're going to build on that and just grow off some inefficiencies that COVID caused," Meyer said.

Before the pandemic, the company saw more demand toward chicken products including shaved chicken, chicken sausage and chicken patties. Cola's made its name on red meat through the years, but they cannot deny that even shaved chicken, which is big with their clients in Philadelphia, is on the rise.

Some new equipment was recently installed by Cola, including a Razorback Model R slicer that is expected to slice about 1,200 lbs an hour that can weigh and slice at the same time.

Also, the company invested in a grinding system and patty forming system that can make chicken patties or traditional hamburgers.

With these upgrades and an updated headquarters, Cola Foods feels primed for the future. After all the experiences of the last few months, it hopes its agility to get to the customer will help them with competitors for a long time to come.

"I have to say we were pretty nimble, and we were able to supply these people where other people weren't," Meyer said. "And hopefully on the other side of this, we can call some of those cards in and create more business." 