

# The Champion

CHEFS IN NEW YORK ARE A BREED UNTO THEMSELVES. THEY ARE ACCLAIMED CELEBRITIES, HIGHLY DEMANDING AND CAPRICIOUS. IN 1987, ONE OF THEM FOUNDED TOM CAT, A BAKERY SPECIALIZING IN SUPPLYING RESTAURANTS, HOTELS AND CATERING COMPANIES. THIS BAKERY IS ALSO CONSIDERED TO BE A BENCHMARK FOR THE COMPETITION



++ figure 1

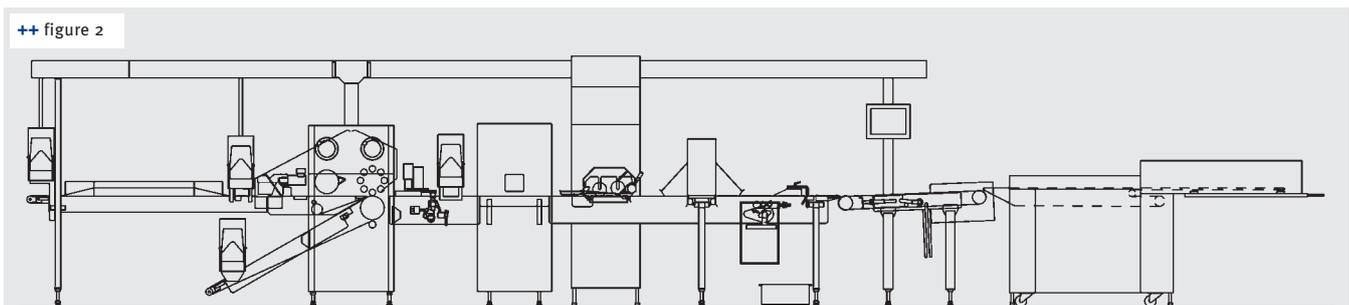
++ figure 1  
One of the very few sweet products made by Tom Cat: Apple turnover

++ figure 2  
Fritsch line Mini-SBL

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The networking amongst the stars of the gastronomy scene in New York functions well, despite the competition. Here, it is decided which supplier is in and which one is out. In the 1980s, Noel Labat-Comess worked as a chef in a fancy four star restaurant. At that time, he baked the bread for his guests himself because of the lack of alternatives. In 1987, he decided to relieve his kitchen crew from this work and offer an alternative to his colleagues. He founded the Tom Cat Bakery and employed two people who baked bread

for 10 exclusive restaurants. This miniature bakery used its own recipes. A year later, James Rath joined the bakery which, at first, had operated from a converted garage. Here the crew provided bread that met the demands and quality expectations of the caterers. The concept worked well. The ten customers from the beginning have multiplied to about 800 today. James Rath, formerly a trained aerospace engineer, became the Vice President of the bakery and is now responsible for the Tom Cat production, product development, and



++ figure 2

The line is a Mini-SBL for soft dough by Fritsch including a satellite head, a cross roller unit, a cutter for longitudinal cutting, a guillotine for cross cutting, spreading belt and product depositing unit.



++ figure 3



++ figure 4

++ figure 3

Parkerhouse is the name of this brioche-type bread that is mainly used for sandwiches

++ figure 4

James Rath, Vice President of Tom Cat (responsible for Facilities, Production, Packaging, Maintenance, Quality Assurance, and Product Development)

quality assurance. Matthew Reich, the current President of Tom Cat Bakery had his food connections as an entrepreneur and founder of New Amsterdam Beer and also as Chief Operating Officer for the highly successful Terra Chips. Matthew has been with Tom Cat since 1995 and has been instrumental in the success and growth of Tom Cat during the last 14 years. Noel has since retired. From last year, two private equity companies (Anchor Capital Partners from Dallas and Merit Capital Partners from Chicago) became the partners of James Rath and Matthew Reich.

Rath explains: "The simple guiding principle on which Tom Cat operates and on which it was founded is to bake the kind of bread the chefs would bake if they were bakers and to deliver it exactly when they need it. Our thinking is not product related but rather customer related. Our customers define our product range. If a restaurant in 43rd street orders a certain rye roll and another restaurant in 45th also wants a rye roll but one that differs in appearance and taste, then they will get exactly what they want. We modify recipes and shapes for individual customers. Each client gets precisely what he wants to have, starting with the type and quality he demands but also including three deliveries a day. We are ready to fulfill extraordinary demands and we are available to magically bake something very quickly if a client happens to forget to order, for a banquet for example."

To satisfy this demand, Tom Cat has an "emergency reserve" in the freezers. However, up to 90% of the 20,000 kg of rolls and bread loaves that are transported freshly made and are packed in Kraft paper bags on trucks that have to maneuver through the busy New York traffic. The delivery radius of Tom Cat is 150 miles, although there are chefs that have moved to restaurants in other cities and who cannot do without the Tom Cat bread. They will also be supplied with ready-to-serve but also with par-baked frozen products. Rath reports, "Our main focus is not on frozen products, but of course, we will meet respective demands. It is mainly those chefs who store their bread for several hours in a heating cupboard who prefer to get par-baked products."

Next to the chefs and caterers – amongst them those who serve New York's largest sporting event, the US Open with its 600,000 visitors and who constantly ask for premium performance from Tom Cat within the two weeks – a third group of customers has been established. Deli shops make

up about 12% of the baked goods sales and their share is rising. The economical crisis has also hit New York's middle and upper classes. People can no longer afford to dine in a first class restaurant each day anymore and will visit at least a first class sandwich shop or buy some food to take home from the deli.

Experts estimate Tom Cat's turnover is about 32m USD each year although it stopped rising dramatically in 2009. Rath explains, "This is a small wonder for New York. The premium class gastronomy has had to cope with dramatic slumps due to the economical crisis. About 260 people work for ►

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++ figure 5

**++ figure 5**  
The dough make-up of the ciabattas and 30 other variations is done on a Fritsch line. As the batches are quite small, the dough pieces are positioned manually

**++ figure 6**  
A classical product from the Tom Cat range: a loaf of bread that is sliced for use in the bread baskets in restaurants. A strong crust surrounds a tender, airy crumb

**++ figure 7**  
Dough production – different pre-ferments mature batch-wise in white plastic bins

**++ figure 8**  
Even though an oven loader is available, most of the small batches are loaded and unloaded manually

Tom Cat with 180 employed in the production department. The production facility in Queens specializes in bread loaves and rolls. Deliveries take place three times a day, seven days a week; breakfast goods between 2.00 and 10.00 am, products for lunch between 9:30 and 11:30 am and bakery items for dinner between 12.30 and 4.00 pm. Not an easy task in New York where delivery trucks are prohibited from parking in many streets and there is always a meter maid on hand to dish out the tickets which cost a minimum 105 USD. Rath explains, “Our budget for paying tickets is skyrocketing. We sometimes have two people on the truck; one drives around the block while the other one delivers the products.”

The breads, baguettes and rolls baked in Queens resemble French and Italian specialties. Rath says, “We prefer the lighter varieties over the heavier and compact ones.” Almost all recipes are based on pre-ferments. Yeast is used in smaller quantities only and not in each recipe. The selection of different wheat and rye pre-ferments, biga, poolish, and liquid



++ figure 6

levain is large. They are all made manually and mature in batch size plastic bins with different added ingredients. The daily production schedule embraces 35 different types of dough which are turned into 300 different products, well balanced between small and larger bread products. Large bread loaves mainly fill the bread baskets on the tables in the restaurants; one quarter is processed into sandwiches not forgetting the enormous quantity of baguettes, flutes and ficelles produced and delivered each day.

The level of automation in the bakery is rather modest. Most of the dough is made manually, amongst them all baguettes and similar bread sticks for which only one manually operated sheeter is available. The only equipment which meets the quality expectations of James Rath and his customers is an IndustrieRex by König for rounded rolls and a small specialist bread line by Fritsch which is used for 30 different products ranging from ciabatta to sandwich rolls. According to Rath, this makes work much easier even though the dough pieces are still deposited manually. +++



++ figure 7



++ figure 8

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