

# BUSINESS

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## Northern Michigan's meat & potatoes

BY JANE LOUISE BOURSAW

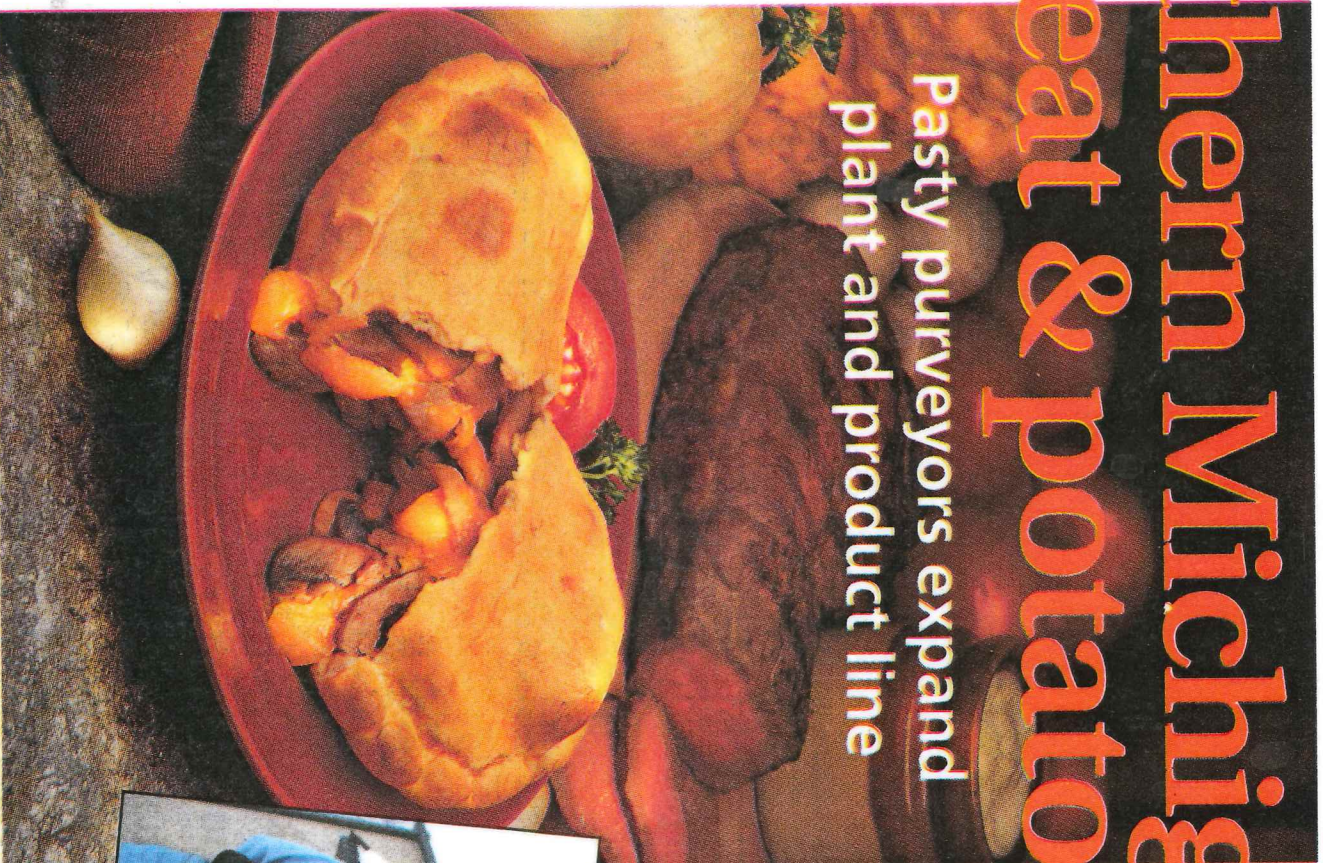
**GAYLORD** - The weather outside is frightful, but here's a good way to stave off the cold: Eat a Albie's pastry, a hearty "no-dish" meal made with steaming hot meats and vegetables baked inside a golden crust.

Albie's Foods Inc., founded by Regan Quaal, Paul Lochinski and Al Quaal, just underwent its third expansion since opening in Gaylord five years ago. The additional 4,000 square feet was needed to accommodate expanding distribution in new states, and growth in states they're already established. They also anticipate introducing a new product or two this year.

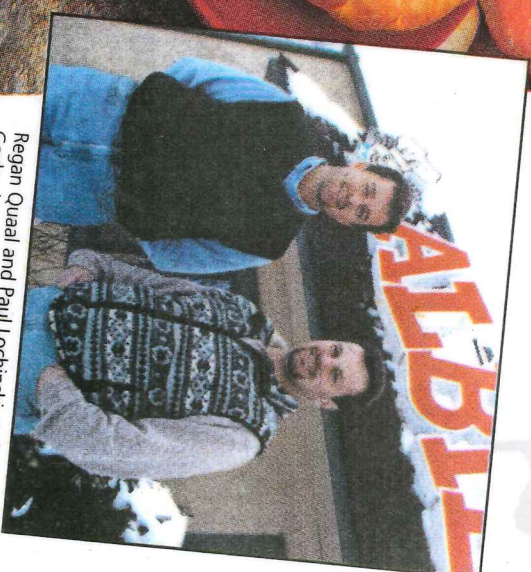
Pasties (pronounced "pass-tees") are usually associated with the Upper Peninsula, but are making their way across the Midwest. Around these parts, if you order a pastry in a restaurant or buy one at the grocery store, it very likely was made at Albie's. They produce about three million pasties every year, not to mention tasty calzones and pot pies.

In 1987, Regan and Paul, childhood buddies fresh out of Michigan State, had an idea to start a pastry business. Although they both grew up in Gaylord, Quaal was born in the U.P. and had family ties there. He knew all about the popularity of pasties, and thought they could be just as popular on this side of the bridge.

So he and Paul approached Regan's Dad, Al (the name "Albie" came from Al's nickname). Together, the trio founded Albie's Foods, with a few carry-out pastry shops in the Detroit area. In 1990, they began manufacturing pasties in a



Pasty purveyors expand plant and product line



Regan Quaal and Paul Lochinski at their Gaylord manufacturing plant.

### ALBIE'S from page 1

Regan says Albie's has shown consistent growth of 15 to 20 percent every year over the past five or six years, which is good because it's "controllable," he noted.

"If we can keep doing 15 to 20 percent every year, that's wonderful, because it's a nice chunk and it isn't too much to soak in all at once," he said. "If you have too much happening at once, a lot of times your service starts to slip."

And they're slowly making their way across the country. You can find Albie's products in restaurants and grocery stores in Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Pennsylvania and Kentucky. Next year, they'll start distributing in North Carolina, but aren't in any hurry to expand further.

"There's still all kinds of room for growth in each of those states, so that could take up our time for quite a while," Regan said.

Since pasties are a very regional cuisine, it's challenging to market them to southern states.

"Chances are good that a person from Ohio or Indiana might never have heard of a pastry, but most people have heard about pot pies and calzones."

While Al is still involved with the company, it's Regan and Paul who run the day-to-day operations, with Regan handling the sales and outside contacts and Paul handling the plant and maintenance.

Their products include beef, chicken and vegetarian pasties; eight varieties of calzones including pepperoni & cheese, steak & cheddar, and breakfast; and chicken and steak pot pies, all in various sizes.

Some stores, like Meijer's and Gordon's Food Service, carry Albie's pasties in the freezer section, but you'll usually find them in the deli department of most grocery stores.

"A lot of stores will run us in their hot case on certain days, so you can get a hot pastry for lunch," noted Regan. "But for everyday sales, they're normally sold for you to take home or take to work and heat up."

He stressed that the fully-baked pasties are known for their convenience and go from freezer to microwave in a snap.

"Del's are trying to sell meals that are easy to use, and ours fit that category perfectly. The food service industry is the same way. They're always looking for high-quality entries that just need to be heated, because everybody has a hard time finding and keeping good employees. The less skill you need, the better off you are. That's been a big part of our success."

The company employs about 20 people, and while parts of the production are automated, "there's still quite a bit of labor-intensive stuff we do," he noted.

Many employees have been with the company five years, and some are edging up to the 10-year mark.

"We've got a heck of a group out there, and bottom-line, that's where it all happens," Regan said.

Key staff include Earl Rider, production supervisor; Mary Howling, packaging supervisor; Jamie Phillips, sales; and Gayla Lambert, office operations.

As for the manufacturing process, individual pasties, calzones and pot pies make their way down the conveyor belt into an oven room, then to a freezing room, then packaging, and finally, palletized and put into a storage freezer to await shipping.

"It's really very simple," Regan said. "We do most of our ingredients from scratch. We make our own dough, grind our own beef, and start with fresh onions and potatoes."

They're fully baked and frozen at the plant, then packaged for either food service or retail."

Pasties originated in Cornwall, England, and were the staple diet of Cornish miners, engineers and blacksmiths. The traditional pastry included beef, potatoes, onion, rutabaga, and turnip, all baked inside a golden crust. The Cornish miners, known as "Cousin Jacks," and their wives, "Cousin Jennys," are properly given the credit for bringing the pastry to the Upper Peninsula in the early 1850s when both the copper and iron mines were first opened.

The U.P. version was a hot, hearty, handheld meal for miners who had no time to come above ground for lunch. Some reheated them underground, setting them on a mining shovel and holding them over head-lamp candles until warmed. But they generally stayed warm anyway.

"The miner's wives could heat up a pastry in the morning, and since a pastry is inside of a crust, it holds its heat for a long time," noted Regan. "The miners would wrap them in towels, bring them back in the mines and still have a warm, hearty meal for lunch."

And for all us non-miners on the go, pasties can also be eaten with one hand while driving in the car.

There are other companies producing pasties, like Cousin Jenny's in Traverse City, as well as several family-owned businesses in the U.P. and northern Wisconsin. But Regan views the competition as a good thing.

"Anybody who does a good job just helps, because if people have one of their pasties and like them, there's a better chance that when they see a pastry, they're going to buy it."

If you've had an Albie's pastry, calzone or pot pie, then you know they're as good (or maybe better) than home-made. That's just what many restaurants think who market Albie's products as their own. But that's OK with Regan.

"I think that's wonderful," he said. "We encourage it."

Albie's Foods, Inc. is located at 1534 O'Rourke Blvd. in the Gaylord Air Industrial Park. BN