

# Culinary Systems creates foods not yet on the 'radar screen'

Tony Lagana draws on culinary expertise to develop products for the likes of Kraft and Red Lobster

By Fiona Robinson

If you've ever wondered who the culinary genius is behind some of the new menu items at Red Lobster or the line of panini sandwiches served at Barnes & Noble cafés, look no further than Tony Lagana. He has 27 years of experience in the food industry and is often called the "new product guru" by his peers.

## Challenge

Tony Lagana founded Culinary Systems in 1997 to develop new products and product lines that have mass appeal for retail and food-service companies.

## Obstacle

Lagana develops innovative products that aren't on any food executives' radar screens, so it takes a lot of persuasion and trust to get them to try some of the products.

## The plan

Lagana does a lot of the demographic, attitudinal and culinary research before developing each product and product line. His company becomes fully integrated with each client to develop a long-term relationship and ensure customers get what they need.

## The results

Culinary Systems has helped its clients develop and introduce new products and product lines that have generated more than \$200 million in sales at retail and in restaurants.

New-product development is Lagana's calling: He has held culinary-development positions with food giants like Kraft Foods and Darden Restaurants.

After several years of working for restaurants and large food companies, he decided to go on his own. He founded Culinary Systems in 1997 to design products that have mass appeal for both retail and foodservice clients. Under Lagana's direction, Culinary Systems has helped its clients develop and introduce new products and product lines that have generated more than \$200 million in sales.

Products Lagana has designed are on the shelves of national supermarkets and menus of national restaurant chains. Bulls-Eye barbecue sauce and Shaw's crab cakes are a couple you may recognize. Lagana's client list features some well-known companies: Nestlé Food Service, Earth's Best Baby Food, Valley Sun and Melting Pot Foods, among others.

Darden Restaurants is a familiar client for Lagana. He was once director of culinary development for Darden's 700-unit Red Lobster chain.

"Darden's systems opened up my ideas on how to run a restaurant on a large scale and be able to control it. They do it better than anyone," says Lagana. "Generating ideas wasn't a problem. Getting your great ideas to actually work and get the American dining public to accept them was the biggest challenge then, and it is the same now."

Before working for Red Lobster, Lagana held a senior position in new-concept development at Kraft Foods, where he developed retail and foodservice products.

He started in restaurants as an apprentice at 16, and his professional resume includes stints at L'Auberge Chez Francois and other fine-dining restaurants in the Washington, D.C., area. He also was an instructor at L'Academie De Cuisine.

The key to creating products with mass appeal is research — and lots of it.

"We focus on the consumers and what their needs are. A lot of times consumers can't articulate their needs and desires. We focus on the consumer at every category, from QSR to casual to fine-dining," says Lagana.

The research methods can include focus groups, mall intercept studies, mailers and concept generation. All of this work starts at Lagana's house in Windermere, Fla., the company headquarters. Culinary Systems has a staff of five full-time chefs including Lagana and his wife, Lek.

A typical day at Culinary Systems pulls its chefs in myriad directions. One day in mid-May Lagana was putting together a presentation for a category study on a buffet segment. In the same day recipes were finalized for a new restaurant concept, sandwiches were developed for a fast-food concept and new products were brought to a manufacturer's plant to test them on a production line.

Keeping several projects going all at once is a big challenge.

"Foodservice timelines are getting smaller. You have to have an idea in your head and taste recipes before you even develop them. Then you have to get the product to the customer within three or four days," says Lagana.

Culinary Systems has developed 3,000 formulas for clients, Lagana estimates. Seventy percent of his business is foodservice clients, 20 percent is retail and 20 percent is new-restaurant-concept development. It doesn't take a math major to see that those numbers add up to more than 100 percent.

"I work more than a regular day," says Lagana, laughing. That's because he doesn't just develop a product for his clients; he establishes long-term relationships with them. "[Potential clients] approach us all

the time. I turn them down because there's no investment on their part. I want a long-term partnership."

Culinary System's first client was a natural-foods company for which Lagana developed a retail bean and pasta kit. Lagana's next, and current, client was Nestlé Food Service. Culinary Systems conducts a lot of marketing and research for Nestlé to justify new product development, says Lagana.

Culinary Systems annually develops 10 new products that are featured in Menu Innovator, an annual report it publishes exclusively for Nestlé. Lagana describes these products as "out of the box."

"The biggest challenge is getting [clients] to look at things that aren't necessarily in their view now," says Lagana. He tells his customers, "You can wait for [products] to go out and not be the first, or you can look at this product now."

Selling a top executive on a new product idea doesn't guarantee it will make it into production. Sometimes ideas get lost when they trickle down through a company's chain of command, adds Lagana.

Depending upon the client, it can take a year to get one of these "out of the box" retail and foodservice products into the marketplace. But Lagana has introduced products that have been on restaurant menus within three months.

It's his job to come up with new product ideas for all his bosses, which number in the hundreds when you consider all of the manufacturers, salesmen, R&D chefs and food executives he works with.

"The challenge is delighting them all so that you can get through to the consumer. It pulls you in a thousand different directions. It's exciting, and it's a challenge," says Lagana. "We're around now because we deliver."

Editor-in-chief Fiona Robinson can be e-mailed at [frobinson@divcom.com](mailto:frobinson@divcom.com)



Tony Lagana  
President, Culinary Systems  
Windermere, Fla.

