



GALENA CANNING COMPANY OWNERS JEFF AND SHERAE HOLDER AND PAT AND RICK WALSH



DIRECTOR OF PRODUCTION CHRIS KEATING



CO-OWNER JEFF HOLDER AND GENERAL MANAGER DAWN LIVINGSTON



THE VENERABLE CHEF IVO



# Galena Canning Company Begins a New Era

By Bryce Parks

Chef Ivo Puidak was larger than life. He wasn't just a talented chef, he was a personality, a character of Galena, IL, who touched so many people's lives not just with his kindness, generosity, and humor, but obviously with the smiles he put in their bellies via his signature flavor creations, too. Over the years, he grew that talent into a sprawling retail operation that took up storefronts on both sides of the 100 block of South Main St. in Galena.

When we sadly lost Ivo to cancer in March of 2020, his son Max returned home from New York to support his mother, Shelly, in seeing the stores and the dream stay alive.

This month, the venerable Galena brand transitioned to new owners, but you could also say it simply transferred to new members of an extended family. Partners Jeff and Sherah Holder and Ric and Pat Walsh cut the ribbon on July 24, but the fact is, Jeff had been going full steam for months before the sale since he came on board at the Galena Canning Company (GCC) in January of 2021.

"I met Ivo in the early 2000s when he had his wares at Galena River Wine and Cheese and farmers markets," says new co-owner Jeff Holder. "And then in 2006, when he opened his first store, I was his Sysco rep. My son Kyle was his first employee, followed by my daughter Kayla a short time later. Then I went to work at the Diamond Jo, where he was a frequent flyer there, loving the Woodfire Grill. We stayed connected throughout the years. Plus, I live in Galena, so I'd swing by regularly, and we had a great friendship."

"When we lost Ivo, Max came back to assist his mother, Shelly, and, knowing

he had a life in New York, I told him, 'If you ever get to the place where you find that this is not your passion, you call me.' None of us wanted to see this go away."

Well, that call happened in the fall of 2020. Jeff was managing Panera in Dubuque, and, in the middle of a pandemic, he was very busy building a drive-thru to adapt to the "new normal" and just couldn't leave Panera hanging. So, he stayed and got it open, and when he felt everything was fine there, Jeff came on board at Galena Canning Company in January of 2021. This allowed Max to return to New York in May of 2021, and Jeff then assumed the duties of captaining the ship.

"It was earlier this year that we began in earnest to buy the business," explains Jeff. "It's a long process, and we were down to the 10-yard line, and I was just short of our goal to get there, and I reached out to a friend who has been my neighbor for 25 years, Rick Walsh. I asked where he went when he needed capital, and he said he had a few places. A couple days later he said, 'I've got a guy for ya.' I said, 'Who's that?' And he said, 'Me!'"

"So Rick and Pat Walsh and my wife, Sherah, and I are partners in the business.

We have the wholesale business, the retail business, the online channels, and we look to grow all three. I was just at all three Hy-Vees in Dubuque today merchandising the shelves and putting together the orders for Monday."

Wholesale is a big growth area for the Galena Canning Company. Jeff was brought on board initially to launch the wholesale side of the business, and already they are up to 55 to 60 accounts including numerous Theisen's, Hartig Drugs, Hy-Vee stores, and a lot of specialty shops and butcher shops in the Chicagoland area suburbs.

Another piece of the puzzle that is critical to the ongoing success of the company is Chris Keating, director of production, who has been in charge of actually making all of those amazing sauces, jellies, and rubs alongside Ivo for 16 years now. He knows Galena Canning Company so well that he's absorbed more than just recipes.

"Chris, working side by side with Ivo for 16 years picked up all of his mannerisms, too," says Jeff. "It's hysterical. It's fun."

"Together, he and I come up with the latest trends for flavor profiles, and we've launched several new BBQ sauces and salsas in this past year. We're working on



JUST A SAMPLING OF WHAT'S IN STORE AT THE GALENA SHOPS



NEW PACKAGING AND THE BEST-SELLING ULTIMATE RUB COLLECTION



FIND THEIR PRODUCTS ON THE SHELVES AT HY-VEE ALONG WITH MANY OTHER STORES EXTENDING OUT TO BUTCHER SHOPS IN THE CHICAGOLAND AREA



a new line called the Competition Series, six new BBQ sauces, three new rubs, and two new wing sauces. Everything you need if you're going to compete."

With one 40-gallon cooker as the magic cauldron that stirs up and cooks as most of their sauces, and being able to make only two to three batches per day (infused olive oil takes three days for one batch), you can bet that the kitchen's calendar is booked solid trying to keep up refreshing the stock of hundreds of products. When they can get a break from the chaos in the winter, they'll literally brew up pallets worth of the big sellers and store them in a nearby warehouse for selling in the peak season... which for BBQ sauce is right now.

"We would love to continue what Chef Ivo started," Jeff says. "I want to make sure that we're always true to the processes and the recipes and the ingredients that Chef developed, and anything we develop beyond that stays within that quality profile. He's always with us."

So now you know the story of how we got here, but perhaps you've been living under a rock and the amazing products of Galena Canning Company are somehow still a mystery to you? Well, by all means, let's have a taste...

"We have over 1,000 products, and 50 percent of our sales come from the products we make," explains recently new general manager, Dawn Livingston.

Even before Jeff bought the place, Dawn was the first person he went to find when he was managing the store and making his plans for the purchase. They have a great history of working together in the

food industry, and Dawn was thrilled to be working with Jeff again. In just a few short months at GCC, she clearly had the place down pat, from knowing the flavors of most of the products, then pointing out to me where the floor in the historic old building had a bump to take note of. You can just tell that she's excited about her work.

"Oh, man," begins Dawn taking a deep breath, "we have [sweet and savory] jellies, jams, preserves, award-winning BBQ sauces, a line of rubs [probably 50 or more], seasonings, salsas, dressings, desserts toppings, queso dips, infused oils, marinaras. We have mustards, relish, grilling sauces, marinades, steak sauces, pesto, sauerkraut, pickled products, olives, and more. We're sweet and savory on one side of the street and hot and spicy on the other."

The stores really are a feast for the eyes and the tummy, as you can sample many of the flavors GCC has to offer. And man, are there flavors, from the best sellers, Hickory Apple BBQ Sauce and Artichoke & Spinach Dip; to bacon jam; sea salt caramel sauce; and literally a wall of hot sauces, both their own and a massive collection from around the world.

I met one woman while shopping this Saturday who came back to town from Milwaukee after having purchased their unique cherry salsa (trust me, it's fantastic) in the past and lamenting not having more. Well, today she had a basket full of it.

With the transition of ownership also comes transitioning of branding, though that really began with Ivo's son Max.

"When you have your own store, the branding doesn't matter so much because

you're not up against anybody else," explains Jeff Holder. "But when you get on a store shelf and you're up against 15 other BBQ sauces, it starts to matter. Max's first initiative was new labels for the BBQ, and from there, I came up with the second generation for the salsas and rubs. We're always trying to make the branding stand out a bit more."

And a good deal of that new branding pays direct homage to the man who started it all, with a playful caricature of Chef Ivo donning an array of different colored and patterned chef hats on the products. If you knew Chef, he seemed to have an unending supply of wacky patterned pants. What a card.

You'll find his smiling mug on the best-selling Ultimate Rub Collection and more products coming down the line. And the "normal" brand you'll find has a cleaner, crisper look against a lighter label versus the old, artsier, and complex logo image. The taste is still great, but now you can read it a little more easily.

And it should not take too long for the new labels to make their way through the store. While most of these canned items are perfectly good on your shelf for three years or more, they never last that long on their own shelves. The BBQ sauce that Chris was whipping up in their 40-gallon cooker will likely need to be made again in as little as three months.

In fact, I think it's been quite long enough since you made the short trip to Main Street Galena and re-stocked your own pantry from theirs. Don't worry, whatever it is that you're craving, they've got it. ■

### Galena Canning Company

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