



# Deep-Rooted Responsibility

For his dedication to family, heritage, quality and industry, *Baking & Snack* proudly recognizes Sandy Whann, president, Leidenheimer Baking Co., as 2002's Rising Star.

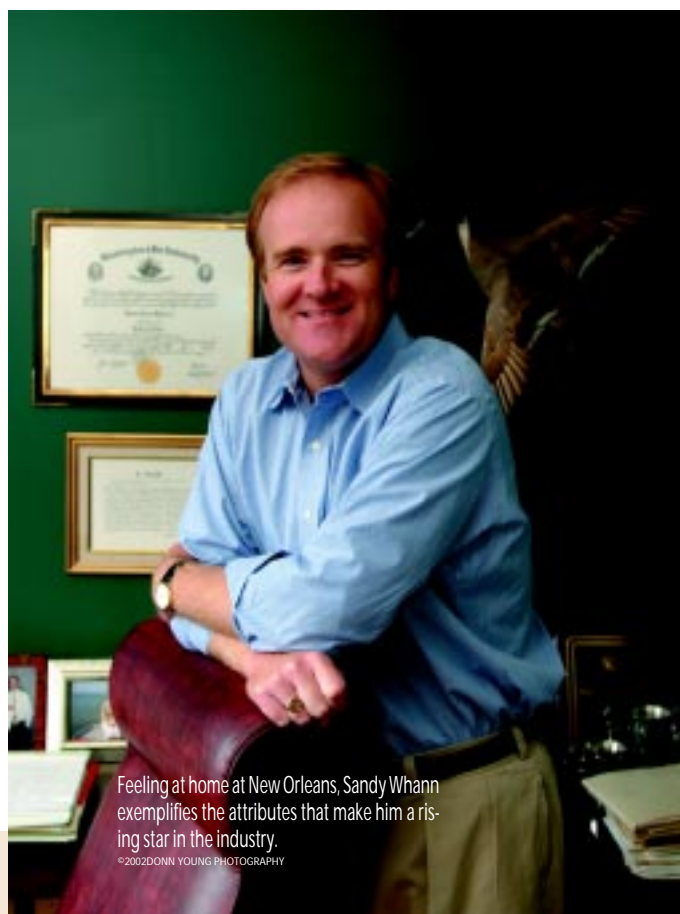


BY STEVE BERNE

**B**orn with flour in his veins, Robert J. (Sandy) Whann always knew what he wanted to be when he grew up. The great-grandson of New Orleans pioneer baker George H. Leidenheimer, Sandy was right at home in the bakery, even when very young.

"This was my 'playground' as a child in the 1960s," recalled Mr. Whann. "I would jump from one stack of flour bags to another. I grew up here, and although I went to Virginia for college, I knew before I left that this city and this bakery were my destiny."

Such devotion, dedication and determination come from a man who had many career choices but chose the family business. That decision combined with the energy, passion and vigor to continue his family's 106 year-old success prompted *Baking & Snack* to name Sandy Whann as its 2002 Ris-



Feeling at home at New Orleans, Sandy Whann exemplifies the attributes that make him a rising star in the industry.

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ing Star.

The award is given annually to individuals on the fast track of industry leadership — having accomplished great things with the promise for more — with the drive to make

a difference in the baking industry. These individuals are leaders, innovators and inspirations to both their companies and their industry.

**BORN INTO BAKING.** Sandy Whann's story is one of strong family relationships, long family history and a series of pivotal points, starting with the death of his paternal grandfather.

"I likely wouldn't have gone into baking if it wasn't for the untimely death of my father," Robert J. (Bobby) Whann III noted. "I was going for my masters in business administration at Tulane when my father, Sandy's grandfather, passed away after only a 3-week illness.

"I felt I really had no choice but to leave school and take over the business," Mr. Whann continued. "There was no one in or



▲ Through four generations and 106 years of practice, Bobby (left) and Sandy Whann continue to have the energy, passion and vigor to further their family's legacy.

out of the family who was interested in keeping the company true to its mission. I couldn't see giving up something that had supported my family for more than two generations."

"My father and I always had a strong relationship," added Sandy Whann. "We also



## Two ways to handle backed up production . . .





had a significant level of respect for each other even before beginning our business relationship. I think that has been key to our continued success and allowed us to make it through all the things that challenge a business like ours.”

Sandy Whann’s first baking experience came when he worked at the local Sunbeam bakery franchise doing route sales as well as



working various positions within the Sunbeam bakery. He also interned at the Mrs Bairds’ Bakeries facility at Ft. Worth, Texas, between his junior and senior year at Washington and Lee University, through his acquaintance with Jerry Baird, another Washington and Lee alumnus. “I had numerous opportunities to spend time with Vernon Baird, the patriarch of the Baird family,” Mr. Whann noted. “Experiencing their family pride, devotion and attention to detail was among the pivotal moments in my life.”

An avid hunter, fisherman, squash player and cook, Mr. Whann joined his father’s business one month after graduating with a bachelors degree in business administration ... at the ripe young age of 21.

◀ Sandy Whann takes great pride in showing off the staple of Leidenheimer Baking, the 32-in. po-boy French bread loaf.



▲ Many of Leidenheimer’s fresh products are still delivered up to four times per day in tall paper sacks.

“Of course, at that moment I thought I knew everything,” Mr. Whann quipped. “It took only one week at the bakery to realize there were more challenges than I could ever

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◀ The bakery utilizes the latest technologies such as this Peerless final mixer with Cold Bar temperature control.

sire — operations, sales and marketing, commodity purchasing and people, just to name a few. Seeing it first from the outside then living it were two totally different worlds. It was a very humbling first week.”

**FITTING IN. MOVING IN.** Mr. Whann became a partner with his dad from Day One, and Bobby Whann gave his son plenty of room to grow and learn. “He gave me so much latitude it made me tread very lightly,” Sandy Whann said, smiling. “I spent the first four years on the night shift, doing everything I could. Perhaps the big-

gest lesson was the value of other perspectives.”

Mr. Whann learned the business from those already doing the job. “Our average production employee tenure is 12 years — 13 years for our salesmen,” Mr. Whann noted. “They obviously had been doing something right for all those years as well as the previous 90. Who was I to come in and drastically change things?”

In the early days, Mr. Whann needed to determine the appropriate level of his involvement in each area — sales, management and production. “Now, after 17 years in the business, at age 38, I am able to step back, view the overall path the company is taking and be sure it is still the direction we want to go. I also consider our company as a collection of families, not just individual employees. Looking at it from that perspective clarifies the responsibility we have.”

Over the years, Mr. Whann embraced and

## Going Artisan

Emeril Lagasse and Paul Prudhomme are certainly synonymous with New Orleans cuisine. However, a new name — Susan Spicer — has emerged in the past few years whom locals place among the premier chefs of the region. But this young restaurateur has another forte — a keen interest in artisan bread. Just ask Sandy Whann.

“Her talent for combining flavors and textures is remarkable,” Mr. Whann asserted. With three restaurants in New Orleans, including her flagship, Bayona, Ms. Spicer considered expanding her endeavors with signature ciabatta, sourdoughs and other artisan breads.

However, instead of opening a stand-alone bakery, she approached Sandy Whann, president of Leidenheimer Baking Co., with a partnership deal.

“It was wonderful timing,” Mr. Whann said. “I always felt Leidenheimer had a place in the industry as a hearth baker. I watched the artisan movement grow and realized that this was an opportunity to come full circle back to my grandfather’s German-style breads — a return to my roots. It has been a tremendous relationship and one that will surely continue to flourish.”

Ms. Spicer and Mr. Whann formed Wild Flour Breads as a partnership almost two years ago. Now, with access to Leidenheimer’s facilities and distribution system, it bakes more than 3,000 lb of dough per week. “This is double compared with how we started,” Mr. Whann noted.

Set up in a corner of the bakery, apart from Leidenheimer’s more automated lines, specially-trained bakers hand-produce ciabatta, focaccia, pain de campagne, potato, sun-dried tomato, sourdough and other breads for local restaurants and hotels.

“It’s been great for everyone,” noted Mr. Whann. “It has added a new dimension to our product mix and new customers for the company, been fulfilling for Susan (Spicer), and consumers get great tasting locally-baked artisan bread.”



▲ Leidenheimer’s delivery trucks are a showpiece of New Orleans “cultcha” with their original artwork by local artist Bunny Matthews.

enhanced his own personal mission for Leidenheimer. “It sounds simple, but I try to make every job easier yet more productive. I look to raise productivity levels using technology only where it can be applied and make sense without diminishing quality.”

Leidenheimer benchmarks with other bakers through the Independent Bakers Association, the Wholesale Variety Bakers Association and The Long Co. “We look at our product’s place in the market, the unique niche we have as the key producer of New Orleans French bread,” said Mr. Whann. “I also look at the forces behind our bakery —



depeople, resource allocation, investment — because getting the right mix applies to more than just the dough.”

**NAWLINS PO-BOY.** Leidenheimer’s 40,000-sq-ft facility built in 1905 may be modest in scale compared with some other bakeries, but by sticking to company virtues, controlling costs and creatively redesigning operations and shipping areas, the bakery outputs more than 30,000 lb of dough per day, 364 days per year. “We deliver fresh bread every day except Christmas, with some customers requiring up to four separate deliveries every day,” Mr. Whann said.

The staple product for the company is the po-boy sandwich loaf. “It’s our unique version of French bread,” Mr. Whann noted. “We produce 32-in.-long loaves that our customers cut into three to four pieces for sandwiches. It is truly unique to ‘Nawlins’ culture. It has a light, but definite, crust and a very open crumb. It is perfect for holding fried shrimp or oysters, roast beef and gravy and other ingredients of the city’s unique po-boy sandwiches.” The bakery also produces muffulettas, multi-grain breads and

Louisiana and has a tremendous impact on the region’s economy.

Much of the growth and expansion came during Mr. Whann’s tenure. “We acquired Reising’s Sunrise Baking in 1990 after the last oil crisis. They were a bigger company than we were at the time with more market share in grocery routes. This started an expansion mode that continues to this day.”

Today, the bakery produces its own Zip brand bread along with a selection of Reising brand items. “We’re doing fully-baked as well as par-baked items,” Mr. Whann added.

Leidenheimer became an early user of hand-held route accounting software after its acquisition of Reising. “This was a seminal point in the company’s history,” Mr. Whann said. “We started with software we licensed from Mrs Bairds.” In 1996, the company switched to RouteTek software, which allows route salesmen to create invoices, track and

heavily renovated the area creating one level,” recalled Mr. Whann.

Leidenheimer purchased or replaced a number of processing and packaging systems during the past few years. Using a traditional sponge-and-dough process, final



▲ Sandy Whann explains the added packaging flexibility provided by Leidenheimer’s newest equipment addition, a LeMatic bulk bread packer.

## College Connections

Call it fate or call it coincidence, but Sandy Whann — Class of 1986, Washington and Lee University, Lexington, Va. — finds himself among a growing list of prominent W&L alumni who have made their mark in the baking industry.

- William Flowers (deceased), chairman emeritus, Flowers Industries — Class of 1933.
- Sam Campbell, president, Chattanooga Baking Co., Chattanooga, Tenn. — Class of 1981.
- Jerry Baird, formerly with Mrs Baird’s Bakeries, Fort Worth, Texas — Class of 1978
- C. Peter Smith Jr., vice-president administration, Schmidt Baking Co., Baltimore, Md. — Class of 1988.

French rolls, also known as Pistolets.

Back in the early 1900s, Leidenheimer was one of more than 200 bakers in New Orleans. “Today, you can count them on one hand,” Mr. Whann said. “Most of our company’s survival challenges came before my time — through the Depression, war time and even the oil shortages of the 1970s and 1980s.” Oil is big business in South

place orders, forecast needs and other time-saving activities.

In 1995, Leidenheimer added 8,000 sq ft to the back of the bakery for a new tunnel oven and spiral cooler. The company also renovated its shipping area that had evolved over the years to incorporate seven different elevations. “It was quite a challenge moving product around the loading docks before we

mixing takes place in a new Peerless No. 10 mixer with Cold Bar technology. After dividing and rounding, dough balls travel through a Winkler stringline forming and pre-proofing system.

Proofing is crucial to po-boy loaves. After a proprietary time/temperature/humidity proof, French loaves transfer automatically off their plastic peel boards into a Werner & Pfleiderer 90-ft, 4-zone tunnel oven, installed in 1995. Ambient cooling takes place on an I.J. White spiral system before entering one of three packaging systems.

“We still hand pack full-length French loaves into large 10-count bags for fresh delivery,” Mr. Whann said. “We also use a UBE bagger for retail packs of small rolls, Italian twist breads, Pee-wee rolls and other products.”

The company’s newest piece of equipment is the LeMatic LS132 bulk packer with dual slicing heads, PLC controls and variable pack configurations. It was installed only two months ago but has streamlined the packaging operation with more flexibility for both products and distribution, according to Mr. Whann. Used mostly for the company’s institutional packs, all frozen bread, round products and sliced



items run through this system. Mr. Whann proudly stated, "It has all the bells and whistles, and lots of untapped capability."

**GROWTH CHALLENGES.** Like all baking companies, Leidenheimer has its share of challenges for the future. "Developing our employees, enhancing the revitalization of the community, controlling our growth and watching for other opportunities like Wild Flour Breads play heavily on our minds," Mr. Whann stated. "We have strong ties to the culture of New Orleans and the people who work and live here. Their future is our future. We're focused on handling the bread needs of the city as well as exporting its culture through our products to other markets."

Mr. Whann has been an integral part of a local Chamber of Commerce committee, which includes city officials and other local food manufacturers. Among their projects was work done with a city college to develop

a specific curriculum for training food manufacturing workers. Various industry professionals and municipal inspectors teach the 14-week course, which began this month and focuses on Occupational Safety and Health Administration regulations, sanitation, Good Manufacturing Practices, human skills and other needs.

"This is a state-funded project," said Mr. Whann, "and we have more than 30 students signed up for the inaugural session."

**FAMILY FUTURE.** The plant expansion in 1995 facilitated the growth of Leidenheimer's products and markets. However, according to Mr. Whann, the plant is once again near capacity. "We produce 20 hours per day, six days per week," he said. "While we can tweak operations to

push more product through, we will definitely be looking at additional expansion within the next few years."

As to the legacy of the family business, Mr. Whann is encouraged about that future as well. "My brother-in-law, Mitch Abide, joined our company about two years ago and has really excelled at learning many aspects of the business. He recently graduated from the 20-week baking course at the American Institute of Baking, and we have great expectations for the future."

Overall, it has been a busy decade for Mr. Whann and Leidenheimer Baking Co. But through self-confidence, proper perspective, an understanding of the awesome responsibility laid before him as well as the respect and latitude offered by his father, Sandy Whann has forged a solid future for a Nawlins icon. ■



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