

THROUGH 19 YEARS IN business, the Szyliowicz family of Denver, four chocolate-lovers who trained together with a world-class chocolatier in Paris, have evolved their private small business from a home-based candy maker to a worldwide brand of their own syrups and drink mixes.

Mont Blanc Gourmet Hot Cocoa, which recently moved from Glendale to south Denver, is a chocolate manufacturer without a chocolate factory.

Yet it supplies gourmet chocolate syrups, cocoas and frozen-drink mixes to such customers as the Cheesecake Factory, Dunkin' Donuts, Peaberry Coffee, Whole Foods Markets, Wild Oats Markets and other shops around the globe.

Along the way the Szyliowicz family – father Joe; mother Irene; son Michael; and daughter Dara – have tried several variations on the chocolate theme, from making chocolate candies to wholesale cocoa powders.

Today, Mont Blanc's No. 1 product is chocolate syrup, and the Szyliowicz claim to be the largest syrup company in Colorado.

"In business you have to be flexible and always on the lookout for trends, willing to take risks and willing to make changes," says Irene Szyliowicz, 67, the president of Mont Blanc Gourmet.

This year promises to be the best ever for Mont Blanc. Sales thus far are double last year's revenue of \$990,000. Based on those sales, the company ranks 210 on the *ColoradoBiz*

annual list of Top 250 Private Companies in Colorado. Projected revenues for 2003 are \$2.6 million.

Growth and staying power over 19 years has been a family tradition. Irene and son Michael, 39, whose title is chocolatier, run the company.

Joe, 71, a professor in the Graduate School of International Studies at the University of Denver, says that he and Dara, 37, assistant professor at the Rawls School of Business at Texas Tech University, are on the fringes of the business. They get involved mainly in strategic matters, like when Mont Blanc considers a new product line, a customer issue, or a new strategic direction.

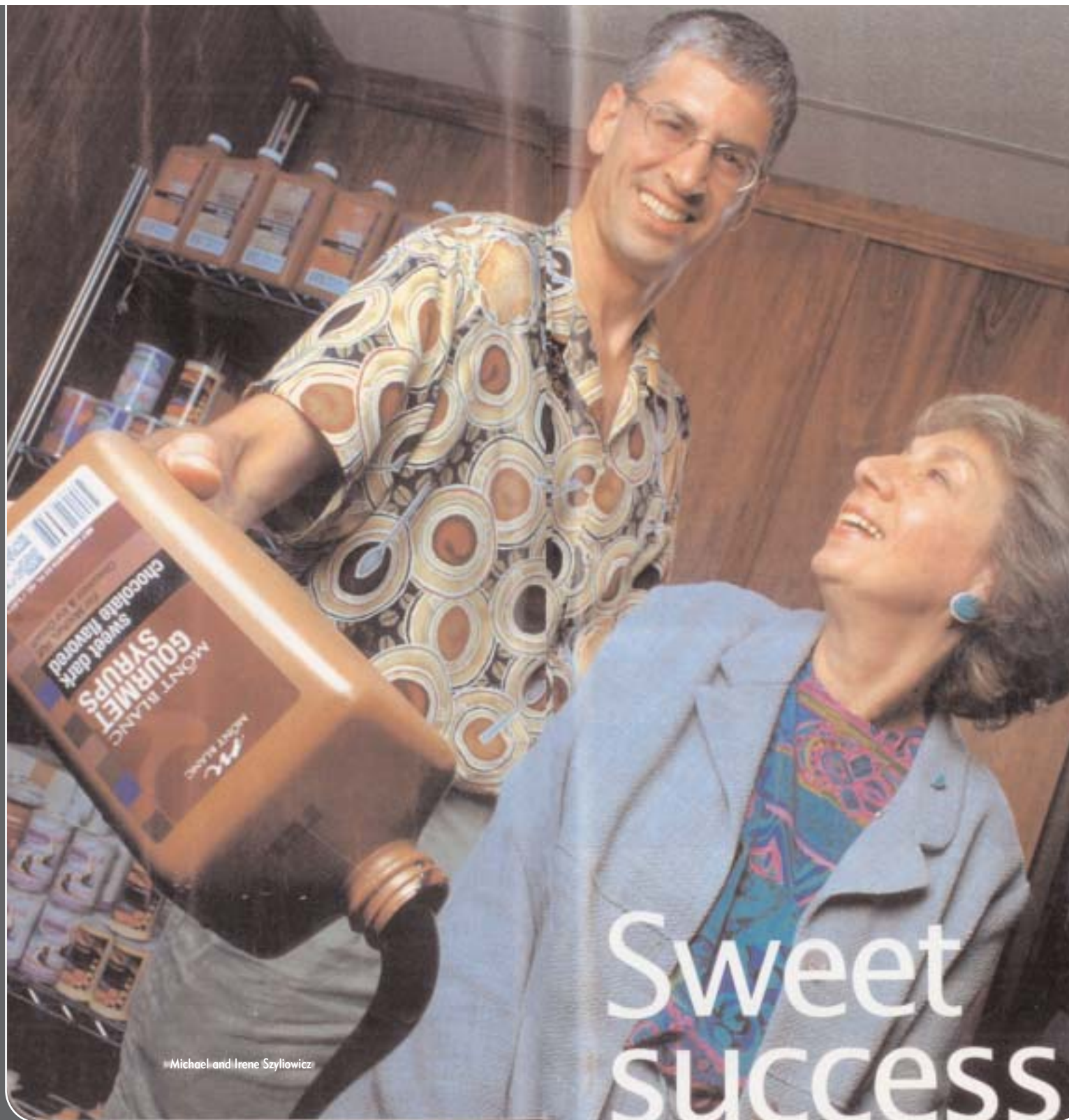
BEYOND LOCAL

Chocolate is not a big industry in Colorado, but Mont Blanc has found a niche in the high-quality chocolate market – supplying drink-making products to coffee shops, cafes, espresso bars and restaurants.

Its chocolate is all natural, and the company imports all its cocoa powder from Europe. Ninety-five percent of Mont Blanc's business is done outside of Colorado, nationally and internationally in Canada, Mexico, England, France, Australia, Saudi Arabia and Korea.

But Colorado figures heavily in the company's success. "One of our favorite customers is Peaberry Coffee, here in Colorado. they are a long-time customer," says Michael Szyliowicz.

Mont Blanc manufactures three kinds of products: syrups, Pour le Café, (a liquid



Denver family
churns out
chocolate

BY JUDY FINMAN
PHOTOGRAPH BY PHIL MUMFORD

Sweet
success
and the
Private
250 list

concentrate to make frozen drinks), and dry mixes. Syrups, in dark and white chocolate and caramel, are mainly for coffee shops – chains as well as mom-and-pop stores. Mont Blanc's Pour le Café comes in cappuccino, mocha and vanilla flavors. Dry mixes include cocoa, cappuccino and chai, sold to a variety of specialty gourmet shops like Tony's in metro Denver and the Brewing Market in Boulder.

"We never touch the product," says Michael Szyliowicz. That's because the company's network of suppliers and co-packers take orders from Mont Blanc, mix and package product according to Michael's formulas, and ship sometimes directly to Mont Blanc customers or to one of the Denver company's distribution warehouses – in Chicago, Denver, Los Angeles, San Francisco and New Jersey.

"For example, a product we produce at a plant in California, we then truck to New Jersey for delivery to East-Coast customers," says Michael Szyliowicz. "It's expensive, but it allows for amazingly fast turn-around and great customer service – within 24 to 48 hours.

"If I need to run 5,000 cases of a product, (the co-packers) have all the ingredients. This is how a little company can play with the big boys."

That little company started when the family retrofitted a wing of their Greenwood Village home to begin a candy-making operation using imported French machinery. At first, under the name The French Confection, the

Szyliowicz sold chocolates to hotels and restaurants.

In 1988, they opened one of Denver's first retail specialty coffee and sweets shops, a forerunner of today's popular latte emporiums.

Then the company abandoned candy in favor of gourmet cocoas, and took the Mont Blanc name.

As sales have taken off this year, the company has grown to five employees, including a recently hired quality-control chef, who helps Michael test new product formulas, and an operations manager to oversee production, shipping and delivery. Michael Szyliowicz now spends much time on the road selling to large clients. Irene still sells on the phone.

Troy Vega, purchasing and warehouse manager at Peaberry Coffee, says his company chose Mont Blanc products for their quality after testing them against other brands. "They focus on quality and are very competitive on pricing. They're very easy to do business with, very accessible. Whatever I need, they send me immediately," said Vega.

Michael Szyliowicz said Mont Blanc will launch two new products this fall: a sugar-free syrup and a non-dairy drink mix made from rice.

"If you love what you're doing, and it's more fun than anything else, that's the whole point," says Michael Szyliowicz. "You get to be creative and innovative, selling a product you love, your customers love, and their customers love."

"That makes us feel really good."