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Voice of the Rocky Mountain Empire

THE SUNDAY DENVER POST

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INTERVIEW

A conversation with Michael Szyliowicz, co-founder of Denver-based Mont Blanc Gourmet, which supplies chocolate and other syrups for coffee shops

Q:

Mont Blanc Gourmet has ranked among the fastest-growing privately held companies in the country. To what do you attribute your growth?

A: In the last two years, it has been a lot of private-label and custom formulations. We've been in business for a while, and a lot of companies are coming to us. As they're growing, we're growing along with them.

Q: Who are your customers nowadays?

A: We work with the country's large coffee-shop companies as well as independents. We work with companies like Peet's Coffee and Tea, and a retailer called Green Beans Coffee Company that is located on U.S. military bases throughout southwest Asia, the Middle East and Africa.

Q: Was your original intent to found a chocolate company?

A: I was originally going to go to law school. My mom had a Ph.D., and we were just talking about going into business together before I went to law school. We decided no one was making good chocolates in Denver, so off we went to Paris and decided to remedy that.

Q: What's it like working so closely with an immediate family member?

A: It's simple. We've been doing this for 20 years, so we don't even think about it. We each have our own areas of expertise.

Q: You moved from operating French Confection retail stores into the wholesale beverage business. Do you miss the retail side of business?

A: I don't miss it at all, but I'm really happy I did it. I think everybody needs to do retail at least once to understand really how difficult it is to do well.

Q: Is the anonymity that comes with being a private-label supplier a challenge for Mont Blanc?

A: No, because it's what we do very well. We understand



Brian Brainerd | The Denver Post

Chocolatier Michael Szyliowicz and his mother, Irene Szyliowicz, went to Paris and learned to make gourmet chocolates. Some of them ended up being served on Pope John Paul II's plane.

that our customers have created terrific brands, and we do everything we can to support their brands. We can bring our expertise to bear on something we know a lot about, which is making chocolate syrup, caramel syrup — the flavor of the drinks — and let them roll it out to their customers.

Q: How has Starbucks altered the landscape?

A: They have done an amazing job of making everybody aware of how good coffee can be. They are driving awareness of coffee drinks and of coffee shops as a place to go and hang out and visit.

Q: It seems like there's a gourmet coffee shop on every corner right now. Is there still room for growth in the market?

A: There's an enormous potential for growth. We have customers that are still building stores in the major cities. Peet's is going to add another half-dozen locations in Colorado. We also have companies that are

growing in secondary and tertiary markets like Omaha and Des Moines. And the export business is just starting to take off.

Q: How did your chocolates wind up being served aboard Pope John Paul II's plane?

A: We got a call from somebody that was involved with his trip about 20 years ago. They had heard we made good chocolates and were supplying a lot of high-end hotels around the country. They called us and said, "We need these for a very special flight." I was pleasantly surprised.

It was just really funny to be in Denver and have somebody call up and say, "We think you make probably the best chocolates in the United States, and we need these for the pope."

Q: Do you have a favorite product that Mont Blanc makes?

A: Actually, I have my iced mocha every day. That tends to be my favorite. We just introduced a new product called Haute Chocolat, which is a very

rich, intense sipping chocolate. I've started using that daily.

It is a very rich, intense chocolate experience much like espresso, and it will be used in much the same way. It's not a drink; it's a component of a drink. You will be able to customize it. People like to customize their drinks, which is why I think it will be successful.

Q: Your offices are located along East Colfax Avenue near the revamped Lowenstein Theatre. What do you think of the changes you're seeing in the neighborhood?

A: I think it's great. I've grown up in Denver, and I've watched Colfax over the years. I really thought it would be great to move here.

Edited for space and clarity from an interview by staff writer Kristi Arellano.