

Business Today

DECEMBER 6, 1993 / The Columbus Dispatch



Mark Pi, left, and William J. Dolan of Mark Pi International, Hilliard

Mary Circe/Dispatch

Mark Pi grows and grows

Institutional interest propels Chinese restaurant into new ventures

By Christopher A. Amatos
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As Mark Pi International expands its base of Chinese restaurants throughout Ohio and surrounding states, the company is making some behind-the-scenes moves that promise to add to its growth in a much less visible manner.

The Hilliard-based operator and franchiser of 74 restaurants is teaming up with some of the nation's largest institutional food companies to supply college dorms, corporate cafeterias, supermarkets and discount retailers with Chinese food.

"If you say to me, 'Where do we get 80 percent of our calls?' it's contract feeders," William J. Dolan, Mark Pi's chief operating officer, said about new business inquiries.

Among Mark Pi's new ventures are:

- Opening an employee cafeteria at Federal Express Corp.'s sprawling hub in Memphis, Tenn.;
- Participating in the Supreme Court, ARA Services Inc.'s supermarket food court venture under way in the Midwest;
- Operating the Chinese food restaurants inside

Kmart Corp.'s Super Kmart megastores;
■ Breaking into the college dorm market;
■ Expanding its Columbus commissary for the third time.

Even though the company is growing rapidly on the institutional side, its restaurants still account for the lion's share of revenues. Systemwide sales will be about \$40 million for the restaurants, whereas manufactured product sales will reach about \$7 million this year, Dolan said.

That could change rapidly, however, if all the plans come to fruition.

"Of the top 10 or 15 contract feeders, there is not one who has not visited us or we have not visited them," Dolan said. "I think we will see some big things with these guys."

One of the reasons for the potential is the growing interest nationwide in Chinese food, Dolan said.

Robert O'Brien, vice president of marketing for the Consumer Reports Eating Share Trends, a leading restaurant industry marketing service, said several factors are driving the increased popularity of oriental food.

"I would say it's a combination of three things. There's more available, it's a fairly good value and baby boomers are getting older," he said.

As the population ages, it seeks more variety and greater sophistication in its restaurant fare, O'Brien said.

Dolan said that changes in operations are helping propel Mark Pi's growth. "The impediment for the growth of Chinese has never been its popularity,"

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