

# PASTA PARADISE

Whitmore Lake's Al Dente Pasta facility is result of owner's lifelong dream



Photos by HIL GOULD

Carol Peterson releases dough from one side of the mixing machine to the other. It is then extracted, cut into pasta form and placed on racks to dry.

By Kasey Everly  
STAFF WRITER

It's the closest thing Whitmore Lake has to Willy Wonka's Chocolate Factory. But instead of candy and chocolate by the cart load, Al Dente Pasta churns out oodles of noodles daily to grocery stores the nation and locally from its single factory on Main Street in Whitmore Lake.

From the outside, the factory appears so conventional outsiders could miss it entirely if it weren't for the giant bag of pasta sitting on one side of the building along U.S. 23. That always manages to attract plenty of attention from passers-by, says Al Dente founder Monique Deschaine.

But from the inside, the Al Dente pasta factory is a delight for curious minds — and for the senses. Smelling the aroma of fresh wheat blending with all the ingredients to make the pasta, tourists are first led through the factory door by their noses. They travel through a maze of tall trays on which lie various colors and shapes of noodles waiting to be dried and immediately shipped out. Finally, the hub of the factory is discovered and workers are seen bustling busily about.

For the 20-or-so factory workers who make the pasta day in and day out, Al Dente means a steady job in a friendly environment with an interesting set of tasks. For visitors, it's a chance to see something new. But for Deschaine, it's the realization of a dream.

Deschaine founded Al Dente in 1981 at age 25 with the help of her then-boyfriend Dennis, whom she later married, and her sister,

Nanette Carson, the company's production manager. But the factory itself, along with the success it has enjoyed in recent years, didn't happen overnight.

It's a story that starts in the French kitchen of her mother, Denise Dubarq, where Deschaine first discovered she loved to cook.

"In French culture, food is very, very important. It's a priority of life," Deschaine said. "My mom is a fabulous cook and she's a very engaging, enthusiastic person. I get a lot of those qualities from her."

Deschaine grew up in Warren, Ohio and earned her degree in psychology from the University of Michigan. Upon her graduation in the early '80s, Deschaine took a job managing The Blind Pig, an Ann Arbor cafe. It was during that time she took note of an important trend in cooking that would ultimately propel her to success: the changing world of pasta preparation.

American culture, Deschaine said, began to pay greater attention to cooking great food and using quality ingredients, and pasta would be largely affected by this change.

"I knew a revolution was happening in the United States in terms of pasta," she explained. "All of a sudden there were new recipes for pasta."

Once Deschaine hatched the idea for a pasta factory, she said she never doubted for a second it would be successful. It was simply a matter of making it happen.

"I'm a risk taker. I never think it won't be successful; I just make sure it is successful," she said. "That's one thing about owning a business — it's not for the faint of heart."

Interestingly enough, Deschaine



Dennis and Monique Deschaine with some of the pasta products in their warehouse.

said she knew very little about pasta recipes when she decided to try to open a factory. To learn more, she was introduced by a mutual friend to world-renowned chef Marcelia Hazan, who Deschaine said taught her everything she knows about making delicious pasta.

"She took me to her beautiful New York City apartment and she taught me everything I needed to know about pasta and that's what I've stuck to all these years," she said.

Deschaine's factory originally

opened in a small space in Ann Arbor with just herself and one additional employee churning out six pounds of pasta an hour. The factory has grown significantly since then, producing 150 pounds per hour, adding up to an impressive 100 tons of pasta every year.

Eventually, she and Dennis moved to Whitmore Lake due to his plans to open a wind surfing business. When they married in 1992, Dennis closed his business to help focus on Al Dente full time as the company's engineer — he even built the building himself and

designed some of its equipment. They now have two children who also help out at the factory from time to time.

The pasta at Al Dente comes in 17 different flavors, from the versatile egg fettuccine to squid ink. Deschaine said making the pasta is a very labor-intensive process that begins with using the highest quality durum wheat, grown in Ohio.

"We don't take shortcuts; we just don't cut any corners," Deschaine said. "I think that's what the secret is."