

HOMEGROWN CULTURE

Not your average ‘strained relationship’ at QU family dairy

BY DONNA PINTEK
PHOTO AUTUMN DRISCOLL

STARTING A BUSINESS REQUIRES vision, commitment and a good deal of elbow grease. As it turned out for Kalioppe (Kommnikas) Emmanouil '85 and her family, it also required a lot of milk!

Emmanouil, together with her husband, Stylianos “Stelios,” their daughter, Meni (Emmanouil) Vasilellis '11, DPT '13, and son-in-law, Ignatios Vasilellis, started Stani Dairy in 2016. The company makes artisan-strained Greek yogurt at its facility in Ansonia, Connecticut.

The Emmanouils' other two daughters, Rhoda Emmanouil '09, MAT '10, and Elli Emmanouil, a current MBA student at Quinnipiac, also work at Stani—as a production assistant and director of operations, respectively. For this Quinnipiac family, it's all about tradition.

Pronounced “stah-nee,” the name in Greek translates to “sheepfold,” and is reminiscent of the family-owned dairy farm in Lesvos, Greece, where Ignatios grew up. Their idea was to bring traditional Greek-style yogurt to the U.S.

The key difference in the “artisan-strained” yogurt is that no milk powders or other thickening agents are used. The yogurt is created with just two ingredients: local, farm-fresh milk and probiotic cultures, which are mixed and fermented, then strained for hours in curd bags to remove the whey, the water naturally found in milk. The result is protein-rich yogurt that is smoother and creamier than others on the market. The entire process—from fermentation to straining—takes about two days. The straining process alone takes 15-20 hours.

Getting their business running was a labor of love, and, with the exception of Ignatios, the company's CEO, all of the owners also have other jobs. Kalioppe—Kali for short—Stani's CFO, is a senior manager at Bailey, Moore, Glazer, Schaefer & Proto, LLP, a CPA firm in Woodbridge, Connecticut. Stelios is an engineer at Sikorsky in Stratford, and Meni is a full-time physical therapist.

“Everybody does a little bit of everything,” Kali joked.

Their Quinnipiac educations—another family tradition—played a key role in the company's development. Kali double-majored in accounting and computer information systems. Meni, vice president of marketing for Stani Dairy, earned a BS in health science studies, followed by a doctor of physical therapy. Rhoda studied biology as an undergraduate and then earned her MAT in secondary education. She is a biology teacher at Watertown High School. Elli is currently pursuing an MBA, while also working full-time at the dairy.



“All of the owners brought different expertise or experiences that helped make it work, and we are expanding, so I think something is working,” said Kali.

Meni's health science background was helpful with the research and development. “She played a role in formulating the recipe and working with local labs to make sure all the nutrition facts were correct and also favorable to the consumer. “People want to see high protein, low sugar, low calories,” Kali said.

“At Quinnipiac, I learned a lot about myself and the qualities I can offer to become an integral part of a bigger team: organization, being a team player, and having high expectations,” Meni said.

In addition to doing product demos and her work at the firm, Kali handles the financial and regulatory paperwork. “In many ways, it's like another full-time job,” she said.

Currently, more than half of Stani's business is food service, according to Kali. Restaurants buy the whole milk, plain yogurt in 10-pound buckets and use it as an ingredient in sauces and dips or simply serve it with added toppings.

The company also produces four flavors of low-fat yogurt—strawberry, blueberry, peach and honey—in 5.3-ounce cups. The yogurt is sold at Adams Supermarkets in Connecticut and Massachusetts, as well as some smaller chain store markets, such as Highland Park Market and LaBonne's Markets.

Of the three daughters, Elli takes the most active role in the yogurt-making process. She was able to put her undergraduate biology degree to use in the lab.

“I was initially intrigued by the more scientific aspect of the yogurt-making process, such as fermentation, chemical and environmental testing. But after starting my MBA, my interests expanded, and I started getting involved in the marketing and business aspects of the company,” she said.

The three sisters are very close and supportive. “Being busy with our own lives and jobs, we still have the time to help one another. I am very thankful that both my sisters have been such a support system. They have been an integral part, stepping in and doing whatever needs to be done,” Meni said.

“Stani Dairy seems like a natural fit for us to all continue spending time and working together toward a business we believe in!” said Rhoda.

Testing the product, from left: Elli Emmanouil, MBA '20; Meni (Emmanouil) Vasilellis, '11, DPT '13; Rhoda Emmanouil '09, MAT '10; and Kalioppe (Kommnikas) Emmanouil '85.