

# Taste Unlimited

By Kristin V. Montalvo

This past October, Taste Unlimited — known for its gourmet food items, specialty sandwiches, hand-selected wines and private-label products — underwent a change of command. Peter Coe, founder of the Virginia Beach, Va.-based store, along with his daughter, co-owner, Sabra Coe Young, announced after 33 years as a solely family-owned and operated store, they were partnering with local lawyer Jon Pruden and his father, Peter Pruden III. We caught up with the store a year later to see how this local institution continues to maintain its unique place in the market, while staying true to its family roots.

### The Best Damn Sandwiches in Town

Ask any Virginia Beach local where to go for the best sandwich in town, and they'll most likely point to one of Taste Unlimited's seven-store locations. "Actually," remarked Jon Pruden, Taste Unlimited's new president, "we've got the best damn sandwiches in town. People have been coming here since the mid-'70s for those signature sandwiches — they're somewhat of a local legend."

Packed to the gills with a variety of specialty deli meats and cheeses and topped with their regionally famous House Dressing,



#### STORE STATS

LOCATION: Virginia Beach, Va.

NUMBER OF STORES: 7; 3 in Virginia Beach, 2 in Norfolk, 1 in Chesapeake, 1 in Newport News

SQUARE FOOTAGE: Ranging from 1,000 to 6,000 square feet

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 110

WEB SITE: [www.tasteunlimited.com](http://www.tasteunlimited.com)

their Classic French bread sandwiches — hand-cut on a slant — have helped make the thriving specialty food store the epicurean destination for sandwich-seekers and gourmet types alike.

"That core sandwich is still our biggest seller after all these years," said Pruden. "It's half the battle just getting people into a store, and we have people coming in two to three times a week for that sandwich." Pruden said the restaurant side makes up half the business, while the retail component and the wine sales make up the other half.



A Family Affair: New owners Peter Pruden III and Jon Pruden, along with Sabra Coe Young and her father, Taste Unlimited founder, Peter Coe.

Ironically, founder Peter Coe originally opened Taste Unlimited as a wine and cheese specialty food store in the Hilltop section of Virginia Beach some 34 years ago. Realizing he needed to distinguish himself even more (his was the first store of its kind in the area), Coe looked into the food/restaurant side of the business and eventually added a sandwich and prepared food component.

A thriving sandwich and prepared food sector helped create a steady stream of foot traffic to the store, exposing customers to Taste Unlimited's unparalleled selection of specialty food items — ranging from chocolate to cookies, crackers and cheese to sauces, olive oils and vinegars and Taste Unlimited private-label foods like specialty nuts, cheese balls, jams and cookies — not found in the local grocery store. Coe refused to carry any “basics,” insisting on remaining strictly a specialty food store. The store garnered a devoted customer following based on Coe's commitment to quality products and customer service.

## Growing the Brand

In 1999, Coe's daughter, Sabra Coe Young, and her husband Bill Young approached him about joining the ultra-successful business, which at the time had expanded to five locations. Sabra, who had grown up watching her father run the show and knew a thing or two about the business, also spent a few years working for public-relations agencies and olive manufacturer FoodMatch Inc. in New York City. Her husband had worked as a commercial lending officer for Nations Bank/Bank of America and was a graduate of the Darden Graduate School of Business Administration at the University of Virginia.

Knowing their corporate world experiences would be the perfect fit for Taste Unlimited, the Youngs bought 50 percent of the business from Coe's silent partner six months later and took over the daily operations. Once onboard, Coe slowly moved into

the creative end of the business — writing cookbooks, hand-picking wines for each store and teaching cooking classes.

In 2001, the Youngs evaluated the business and decided it was time to update the company's image with a fresh look. While Taste Unlimited's flavor would stay the same, they changed the store's color palette and adopted a new logo that would position the store as a fun and exciting place to shop. The new logo sported the now well-known characters that the Youngs refer to as “peanut lady,” “wine guy” and “cheese man.”

In 2003, the Youngs, with Coe's help, added their sixth store located in Chesapeake/Greenbrier. They introduced new services, such as “Gifts to Go,” pre-packaged gift baskets, and “Party to Go” pre-set menus that come priced for groups of 10, 20 and 50 partygoers. They also included recommendations for wines to accompany the menus — “soft and smooth,” “clean and crisp,” “just juicy” and “silky smooth” — all of which correspond directly to how Taste Unlimited displays and markets wine.

## A Family Affair

Fast forward to 2006: Local lawyer Jon Pruden and his father, Peter Pruden III got wind of the fact that Taste Unlimited was looking to bring in partners and explore growth prospects. “I was looking for new opportunities and my family had been in the food business for four generations, so I think I had that itch that needed to be scratched,” said Pruden.

A corporate attorney by training, Pruden explained that after making partner, he felt he had done all he really wanted to do in the field of law. His father, Peter Pruden III, was certainly no stranger to the food business. He had co-founded and was executive vice president of The Smithfield Co's. Inc., a specialty foods holding company that included The Smithfield Ham and



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Products Co. and The Peanut Shop of Williamsburg (Smithfield Foods Inc. acquired it in 2001). He is also chairman of Old Dominion Peanut Corp., a Norfolk-based snack company.

According to Pruden, one thing led to another and they ended up purchasing Taste Unlimited outright in October of 2006. Pruden and his father immediately took over the day-to-day management of the business — from the financial aspect to marketing to the Web site — while Coe remained a co-owner of the company he founded. His daughter, Sabra, stayed with the company as well, though her husband Bill decided to leave and tackle the corporate world once again.

“Peter (Coe) and Sabra’s roles really haven’t changed all that much,” Pruden explained. “Essentially, Peter does what he’s been doing for 30-plus years. He still does all of the wine and cheese buying and leads our seasonal cooking classes. He’s a local celebrity of sorts. Sabra is the executive buyer. She makes all of our choices on the retail side. She has tremendous food knowledge and a truly sophisticated palate.”

He continued, “My whole family is working in the business together now — me, my father, my brother and my wife,” said Pruden. “It’s truly a family affair and even more so since Peter and Sabra have remained on. It’s a great relationship. We’ve got two families that are very passionate about the business and food, working closely side-by-side. It’s really a unique partnership.”

Both Coe and Young agreed. “This partnership is a great opportunity for us to remain actively involved while adding new energy and investment that will allow Taste Unlimited to capitalize on many growth opportunities,” said Coe. “The Pruden family shares our passion for the specialty food business and appreciates the unique culture of a family business. It’s an exciting time,” added Young.

### Serendipitous Start

Soon after the Prudens came onboard, a unique opportunity presented itself to



Employees serve up the “Best Damn Sandwiches in Town” at one of Taste’s three Virginia Beach locations.



add a seventh location. In June 2007, Taste Unlimited acquired Medik’s Market/Fab Foods at the City Center at Oyster Point in Newport News.

“That was serendipity,” explained Pruden. “It just came up and it was a great opportunity and it worked well within our existing infrastructure — from the great space to the wonderful staff to the exciting products.”

Founded by Kathy Schiller in 2003, Medik’s Market/Fab Foods offered a similar product mix to Taste Unlimited, plus a full line of organic and natural foods. At 5,593 square feet, the City Center store was nearly twice as large as any other Taste location. It now serves as Taste Unlimited’s flagship store.

“We tore down the wall that had previously defined the produce section

and opened it up for more café seating,” revealed Pruden. “This location has our core elements that everyone knows about — namely the deli menu — but it also has the widest offering of retail items.”

Pruden said the expanded seating will allow for future growth in the prepared foods section, which currently boasts a nice variety of Taste’s homemade salads, including a “to-die-for” curry chicken salad, as well as Chesapeake Crab Cakes, marinated grilled chicken and other entrée-type items, which are all prepared daily in Taste Unlimited’s central kitchen and hand-delivered to each of the seven locations.

“Traditionally, our prepared foods have been a complement to the deli part of the business, but it’s an area where we’re looking to include more variety as we go forward,” he said. “We’d like to develop the evening part of the business so people can stop in on their way home from work and get dinner. That’s an area where we’ll certainly be pushing growth, but right now, our offerings in that area are somewhat limited.”

## To Grow or Not to Grow?

That certainly is the question the Prudens have been pondering since acquiring Taste Unlimited just a short time ago. “I’d be lying if I said we had a grand growth strategy right now. We’re new enough in this where we’re still getting our hands around exactly what the business is and what the changing business dynamics are. Frankly speaking, we’re really in a period of introspection,” Pruden confessed.

He continued, “We’re struggling a bit with the pros and cons of what I like to call ‘growing small’ and remaining a local player and just doing what we do really well, versus all the challenges that come with growth. I will say we won’t grow for the sake of growth. If we were to grow, it would have to be manageable. The last thing I would want to happen is for us to become much bigger, but lose what we’re all about — the focus on product and on service. A lot of retailers feel the pressure to grow as big as they can and then I think they start to take their eye off the ball and that’s when their competition catches up with them — they’re not focused on the things that made them great.”

Right now, an area of growth Pruden is intent on focusing on is improving the company’s Web site, which currently derives sales in the 5 to 10 percent range. At [www.tasteunlimited.com](http://www.tasteunlimited.com), customers can order gift baskets, corporate gifts and Taste’s private-label products — including Taste Unlimited Crunchy Virginia Peanuts and other assorted nuts, Taste Unlimited Chocolate Chip Cookies, Taste Unlimited Apple Butter and Taste Unlimited Virginia cheese balls, to name a few.

“The Web site is certainly an area where we’re doing a solid business now — particularly around the holidays — but I feel there’s so much more potential in that. We really have not invested in that part of the business in order to grow it the way it could be grown.”

Pruden said he’d like to ideally see the Web site run as a separate

CDN

CLICK 251

Frontier Soup

CLICK 204



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A customer ponders which Taste Unlimited specialty to “indulge” in.

business with someone solely in charge. “They could dedicate the time and attention it needs to have to run it successfully. But, with that said, I am happy for what it does for us right now.”

### Staffing Issues

While it certainly can't be easy stepping into a second-generation run company, Pruden said the biggest problem he's had to deal with is something many retailers face — keeping a dedicated, well-trained staff.

“We're in a military region and a tourist destination, so we have a lot of seasonal swings of people coming in and out, so it's somewhat of a challenge,” he explained. “Every week, people are moving on and migrating. And then there's the challenge of dealing with seven stores that are each distinct and have their own physical plant issues and attributes. It's nearly impossible to do anything formally because you've got an exception for every rule. But that's what makes it interesting, and I don't think I would have left my old job if this were a cookie-cutter environment and we were just doing something repeatedly from store to store.”

### Keeping Pace With the Times

In looking back at Taste Unlimited's 34-year history, Pruden believes what has set them apart and given them longevity is the willingness and eagerness to innovate and keep pace with the times. “We're trying to be out there on the front line finding new products that are new and interesting,” he said. This involves attending all the major trade shows and going on buying trips to search out unique, high-quality wines and foods.

In June, Young and her father attended a buying trip to Greece organized by *The Gourmet Retailer* magazine and sponsored by HEPO, a Greek organization whose goal is to educate the world

about the versatility of Greek foods and the amazing health benefits of a Mediterranean diet.

“They came back with a ton of great new products including some wonderful Greek Feta, Total Greek Yogurt and Renieris Estate Olive Oil that were in our stores within a week. It was pretty amazing. I was really impressed. Sabra definitely takes the lead in that role,” Pruden effused.

Young explained that during the fourth quarter, she likes to bring in some items to “wow” the customers. “Last season, we carried mini marinated artichoke hearts (the size of a nickel), which were delicious,” she said. “We try to focus on items that are great entertaining items, which can easily be given as gifts and will be well-received by our customers. In fact, we're gearing up for our new wall of chocolate bars which will include the Vosges Bacon Bar. You've got to try it.”

Young recently took part in a “backstage” tour of fellow retailer Chapel Hill, N.C.-based A Southern Season, where she encountered her first chocolate wall with over 100 bars to choose from in different cacao percentages. “Our customers are becoming more and more educated about various types of chocolate. We want to fuel this excitement and help them get what they want,” she said.

Though Taste Unlimited stocks its shelves with eclectic, hard-to-find products, Pruden is quick to point out that they're not food snobs. “We enjoy good and interesting foods, but we don't want the perception of being presumptuous food snobs. We want to find great foods and share them with our customers and not put a whole lot of pretence on it. It's that simple.”

He continued, “Peter said he remembers when we first started carrying the Paul Newman Salad Dressings and how great that product was. He thought it was the best thing since sliced bread. Sure enough, it soon found its way into the major grocery stores. We've got a rule of thumb that once we see it in the grocery store, we give it a pat on the back and send it on its way. Sometimes it's sad because you've got a lot of great products you have to give up in order to keep your product mix interesting. That's probably what sets us apart — we're willing to make that choice and we're willing to rotate out products that have become a little too popular.”

### Continuing the Success

Pruden believes that Taste Unlimited is an incredible brand built by equally incredible people, but says he will continually strive to improve, innovate and create a superior customer experience.

“I know a lot of retailers say this, but I think the enduring success of this brand has been due to its emphasis on quality products and excellent customer service. We don't offer anything at Taste Unlimited that people have to have — these are luxury items. People seek us out as an indulgence to their pleasure principle, it's a way to make an ordinary day a great day. It's neat being a part of something that can do that. And it doesn't hurt having the best damn sandwich in town either,” he laughed. GR