



Photos courtesy of McDonald's

# Heritage of Excellence

**McDonald's supplier East Balt, Inc. perfects its core products while helping create new classics.**

By Lynn Petrak

**W**ho knew that the bun for the McDonald's hamburger could be a metaphor for the company's commitment to product quality and consistency and the integrity of its relationships with suppliers?

As Ray Kroc remarked early in his career as the creator of the McDonald's franchise system: "It requires a certain kind of mind to see beauty in a hamburger bun. Yet is it any more unusual to find grace in the texture and softly curved silhouette of a bun than to reflect lovingly on the hackles of a fishing fly? Or the arrangements and textures on a butterfly's wing? Not if you are a McDonald's man."

These exacting and perhaps poetic

standards that McDonald's has for its baked goods began right with Kroc, as he put together his original business in the northern suburbs of Chicago. As the story goes, a local baker named Louis Kuchuris was making calls to restaurants one day in 1955 when he happened upon a new establishment and wandered in to talk to the owner, who was Kroc.

More than 50 years later, that baker's company still provides buns, muffins and bagels to what is arguably the world's most well-known and-frequented fre-



**Frank Kuchuris, chairman and CEO of East Balt Inc.**

quented quick-service restaurant chain.

"We are one of their longest standing suppliers," notes Frank Kuchuris, Louis' son and current chairman and chief executive officer of East Balt, Inc.

Today, the company handles bakery products for McDonald's Midwest

restaurants, working from the continually updated plant that the Kuchuris's built in 1969 along with other facilities in Orlando, Fla.; Denver, Colo.; and St. Paul, Minn. East Balt extended its reach globally into Europe



in 1991 and Asia Pacific in 1994 through the joint acquisition of a European bakery that produces buns for McDonald's restaurants in the United Kingdom and Belgium.

Putting a slight twist on the adage that the more things change, the more they stay the same, a significant portion of East Balt's business is devoted to producing buns for the McDonald's signature basic hamburger and cheeseburger.

"It's essentially the same formula we developed more than 50 years ago. There have been enhancements, but we have never taken away any of the basic quality attributes of the bun — it's what the customer has come to expect and like," says Kuchuris.

As for the change part, original supplier East Balt has also been a go-to source for new, innovative sandwich buns and other bakery products, whether they wound up as permanent menu items, limited-time menu items or just a concept being tested.

One recent addition has been the artisan style bun for the McDonald's Premium Chicken Sandwich — a line of heartier, more upscale sandwiches rolled out nearly two years ago. During the development process, East Balt and McDonald's recreated their initial chemistry from the 1950s as they tried different versions.

"It took the special development of a divider to make the crusty sandwich bun — it was a harder type of dough versus a regular hamburger bun dough," Kuchuris says. "We also put steam in the oven. That's where you get the crust and the split on the top part of the bun."

Those involved with the McDonald's business understand that there is a continual, pivotal balance between meeting customer expectations and keeping an eye on ever-evolving taste preferences, Kuchuris says. That's why East Balt also has expanded into supplying tortillas for the



**East Balt Inc. has been a supplier of buns to McDonald's for more than 50 years. In addition to the United States, East Balt produces buns and other products for McDonald's in China, Ukraine, Morocco, South Africa and other countries across the globe.**



Snack Wrap and Breakfast Burrito and various muffins and

bagels on the breakfast menu.

McDonald's also works diligently to maintain strong relationships with its suppliers.

As East Balt works as part of the "three-legged stool" structure that is the hallmark of the McDonald's organization — comprised of the company, the owner/operators and the suppliers — the bakery's leaders understand that a supplier is part of a bigger picture, and that competition is defined differently here. Kuchuris points to East Balt's involvement with the in-house bakery council at McDonald's, which consists of the company's bakery suppliers.

"In the council, you share your best practices and that is important to advance all — instead of proprietary ideas, we share best practices — strengths and opportunities to benefit system," he explains.

East Balt also gets directly involved with the owner/operators from time to time. In fact, several innovations have

stemmed from that limb of the McDonald's three-legged stool

"So many of the sandwiches — the Big Mac, Egg McMuffin, and many others — came from owner/operators," Kuchuris notes. "Owner/operators came to the company with an idea and then they came to their suppliers, talking to the meat

man and the bun man and said, 'What can you do with these things?' We all get together and work it out."

A commitment to excellence means knowing when and why to tweak a product. The bun, after all, is what keeps it all together for many menu items at McDonald's.

"When a person eats a sandwich, the only thing they actually see is the bun," Kuchuris notes.

"They rate the sandwich on the quality of the bun — if the bun isn't the best quality bun it can be, they'll notice. And it has to be the same high quality everywhere." **SF&WB**

