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## Tannette Johnson-Elie | Connections

# Business duo markets 'cholive' as martini's new, chic sidekick

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In a city known for producing and consuming beer, two local entrepreneurs hope to put Milwaukee in the spotlight for a martini garnish they have developed as an alternative to the olive.

It's called the "cholive," a decadent, dark chocolate truffle filled with a silky whole cream that's shaped like an olive and fits on a toothpick.

The cholive is intended as a garnish for martinis, particularly the chocolate-flavored variety, and other cream-based drinks, like Irish coffee. It is being marketed to institutional customers like bars, restaurants and hotels.

Josh Gentine, 28, and Joseph Hausch, 47, developed the cholive two years ago and built a company around it — Cholive Co. LLC — a six-employee firm on Milwaukee's east side.

Since its rollout last spring, the cholive has been picked up by the Intercontinental Milwaukee Hotel, 139 E. Kilbourn Ave., and Mi-Key's, a restaurant and lounge at 811 N. Jefferson St.

"This is a table-ready, foodservice chocolate," Gentine said. "People want something unique. It's getting volume. It's getting acceptance. It's creating the expectation in the consumers' mind that when they receive a cream-based drink, they will get a cholive. We hope to be the Kleenex of chocolate garnishes."

The toughest hurdle for Gentine and Hausch will be raising consumer awareness about their product, says Dennis Garrett, associate professor of marketing at Marquette University.

"They're going to have a real uphill battle. Lots of people have great ideas for new products," says Garrett. "You may have the best idea in the world, but it comes down to, how do you make your target customer aware that your product exists?"

Gentine, a former finance professional, and Hausch, a graphic designer, launched the Cholive Co. last year after nearly two years of research. The partners used money from their personal savings to finance the venture and are seeking early-stage, or angel, investors.

It's a partnership that began in 2004 after Hausch came up with the concept for a chocolate garnish for a client. Hausch owns a graphic design firm in Franklin called Hausch Design Agency.

A close friend introduced Hausch to Gentine, who was struggling to get a soda company off the ground. Gentine was so impressed by the concept for a premium chocolate garnish that he sold his stake in the soda business and teamed up with Hausch.

"He came to me and said, 'I've got this awesome idea. I want your perspective as to whether this would work,'" says Gentine. "There wasn't a garnish for cream-based drinks. We wanted customers to be blown away by something unique, something different."

The partners complement each other well, as Gentine brings financial acumen to the table and Hausch is the creative side of the duo.

But Gentine provides another key advantage: Connections in the food and beverage industry.

Gentine's grandfather, Leonard Gentine, is the founder of Sargento Foods. As a kid, Josh Gentine sampled products that his dad brought home and played hide-and-seek with his siblings in Sargento's corporate headquarters in Plymouth, west of Sheboygan.

Exposure to the family business enabled Gentine to develop knowledge about the consumer products industry and an understanding of the consumer research process. What's important, though, is that he has been able to tap into expertise, connections and resources.

"My dad grew the consumer products side into this multimillion-dollar division. I get his advice as much as I can," Gentine says. "I go up to Sargento as much as I can and pick the brains of our marketing and sales people and our CFO."

Gentine also called on hundreds of food and beverage industry managers throughout the nation to help determine whether his product would sell and to gauge pricing.

"People are loving it," says Robert Ash, Intercontinental's executive chef and food and beverage director. "It's that little surprise on the bottom of your drink."

At the 2008 National Restaurant Association Show last May in Chicago, the cholive was voted one of the top five new products.

But it hasn't been all smooth sailing. Gentine and Hausch struggled to find a company capable of producing the cholive, which required special molds that could be filled with chocolate.

"We could do it by hand. I was looking to do something unique that could be mass produced and packaged," said Hausch. "I was looking at local chocolatiers. They felt it would be a difficult business model to fit into their production cycle. I hit dead ends from here to Mississippi."

After a year and a half of searching, they found a Vermont manufacturer to take their product. The partners made a considerable financial investment to have 100 molds shipped to Vermont from Switzerland. The first batches of cholives were produced last November.

It's good to see this kind of innovation coming out of Wisconsin.

"There are a lot of good products in this area," says Gentine. "This is our opportunity to show the nation that we have a product that can succeed."

Here's hoping he's on the money.

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