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Casual 2008 Market

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A profile of Primo Grills and Smokers and the man at the helm of the company.

MOUSAKA, OUZO and a FACTORY TOUR



George Samaras, president of Primo Grills and Smokers sure can throw a party. The native of Greece hosted 150 lucky guests recently at his company's headquarters just outside Atlanta. But it wasn't the roast lamb, the mousaka or even the ouzo that took center stage. The real highlight of the event was the factory tour, which gave visitors an insider's peek at how the Primo ceramic cooker is made.

"I wanted dealers to understand the product and see how it is created," Samaras explains. "Ours is the only ceramic grill manufactured in the United States, so not many people have had the opportunity to see the process in person."

How Samaras came to make and

sell ceramic cookers is an interesting story. After earning a degree in pharmacology, he served as a pharmacist in the Greek military for three years. When his tour of duty finished, he turned his lifelong sailing hobby into a profession, racing sailboats and captaining 50-foot yachts on tourist excursions throughout the Greek islands.

On one such trip he met his wife Kelly, an American who was vacationing with her family in Greece and had chartered Samaras' boat. The sea captain charmed the young woman; she eventually moved to Greece and the

Guests line up to sample the wonderful fare, much of it prepared on a Primo grill.



(L. to R.) Kelley and George Samaras, Jeff Whitaker, Jim Stancil, Kevin Lee, Beth Lee, Kostas Loukatos, Bri Pennie.

two married. After living in Greece for seven years, the couple moved to the United States.

"When we got here, my father-in-law had an Imperial Kamado and it was unlike anything I'd ever seen," Samaras remembers. "I hate dry meat, but this cooked meat that was moist and delicious. It was right before Thanksgiving when I first moved to the States, and it was the first time I had turkey. It was cooked on the kamado and it was fantastic."

Samaras not only bought a kamado for himself, but began shipping them back to Greece for friends and family members. He even asked the product's U.S. distributor if he could start a distributorship in Greece, but his request was denied.

"I thought, This product is too good to be sold by only one company," Samaras recalls. "I am going to make them myself." He spent the next several years researching the best formula for the refractory material and consulting with top ceramic engineering experts in the country.

In 1996, finally satisfied with the result, he began selling his Primo grills. Samaras' first manufacturing facility was a 1,500 sq. ft., sublet space. He made the units one or two at a time and transported them to a kiln across town for firing.

Today, all that has changed. In little more than a decade, Primo has established itself as a serious player in the

ceramic grill category, second behind leader Big Green Egg. The company is now headquartered in a nearly 30,000 sq. ft. facility with 16 employees. It recently invested in a new \$1.7 million kiln, which has greatly increased production capability. The number of Primo dealers is up 100 percent over a few years ago, and sales continue to double annually.

While part of the success can be attrib-



It takes a loooong spit to feed this many people, and three Primo Ovals.



Hearth & Home writer Lisa Readie Mayer asking questions – as usual.



Molds, which will form Primo ovals, are waiting to be filled with the ceramic slurry mixture, called slip. Top and bottom sections of the cooker are formed separately.

uted to growing consumer awareness and interest in the ceramic grill category in general, Samaras acknowledges that the introduction of Primo's oval cooking surface configuration is what really put the company on the map.

Introduced in 2006, the oval grill is a departure from the traditional round

kamado shape. The patented Primo Oval comes in two sizes – Oval XL, which accounts for 65 percent of sales, and the smaller Oval Jr., which makes up 35 percent of sales. The company still makes a traditional round Primo kamado, but it represents only five percent of sales.

"The Oval shape is unique, and has

been instrumental to our success," reveals Samaras. "The configuration fits the natural shape of many foods so you can cook more at once."

With 680 sq. in. of cooking space available when multi-tiered racks are in place, the Oval XL has the largest cooking surface of any ceramic grill on the market, according to Samaras.


Manufacturing Primo ceramic cookers is a five-day process start to finish.



Glaze is applied to Primo Ovals. At this stage the glaze is a gray color, but it will emerge shiny and black after the firing process.



Racks of newly dried and glazed Primo Oval Jrs. and Kamados are prepared to enter the kiln for firing.



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First, seven different types of natural clay materials are mixed in a huge vat to make a slurry called a "slip."

"There are different naturally-occurring mineral and chemical compositions in each type of clay," explains Samaras. "Under heat, chemical reactions among them occur and the materials bind together to form an extremely durable refractory ceramic."

After testing by the ceramic engineer for proper viscosity, the slip is poured into molds and the viscosity is

"It is a handmade product crafted with quality and I think it makes a big difference that it's made right here in the U.S."

— George Samaras

checked twice more throughout this casting process. After a few hours, the inside portion of the mold, which forms the concave inner core of the cooker, is removed and, several hours later, the entire unit is taken out of the mold and brought to the drying room.

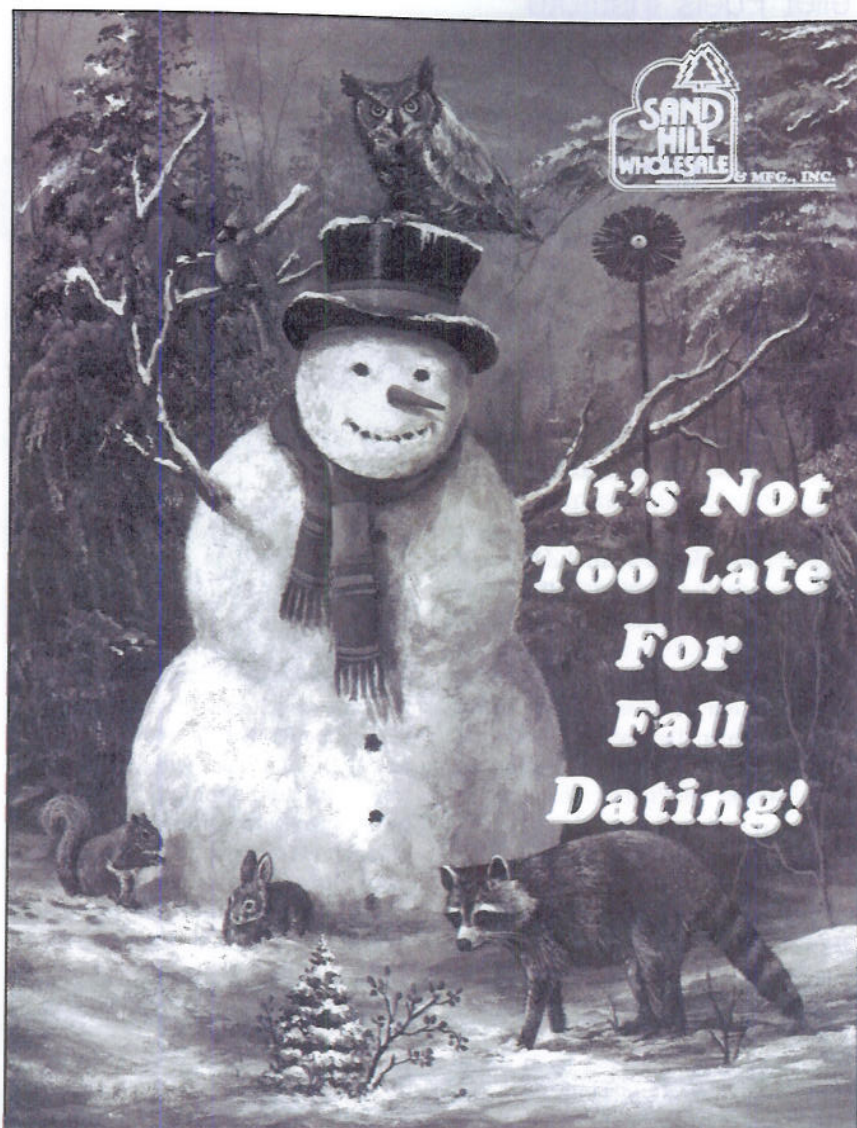
The cooker spends about three days in the drying room at a temperature of 90 to 110 degrees. Fans circulate the heat within the room, and moisture in the air is kept below 12 percent. Once the unit is completely dry, a lead-free glaze is applied to the exterior. The unfired glaze is a dull, soft gray color.

The cooker spends the next 25 hours in the kiln, a giant oven with 28 burners, each one million Btus, combining to reach temperatures of 2,400 degrees. Approximately 120 units can be fired at a time, stacked on racks inside the kiln. Powerful flame jets surge from the burners that surround the lower interior perimeter of the oven. Once they have cooled, the cookers emerge with a glossy black finish.

The final step is to add the gasket, vent, hinges and other components, and then it's on to the packaging area before heading out the door.

"It is a handmade product crafted with quality and I think it makes a big difference that it's made right here in the U.S.," Samaras adds. "It allows me to have control over the entire manufacturing process. If something goes wrong I can walk 30 feet and correct it."

George Samaras accepts that he has no control over the inaugural meal for each new Primo grill. If he did, he might recommend a menu inspired by his native Greece — perhaps some nice paidakia (grilled lamb chops) with a side of dolmades (stuffed grape leaves), and of course some ouzo. Oopah!



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