



# The 2018 Leadership Awards

Once again, it is our pleasure to partner with *Food in Canada* in sponsoring the Industry Leadership Awards. The companies that have been honoured this year are great examples of industry leaders who have made a significant contribution to food and beverage, and are well deserving of the recognition. Their achievements are a credit to their management, employees and ownership. We are very proud to have the opportunity to recognize them this year.

As is the case for food and beverage consumers around the world, consumers here in Canada are raising their game when making their food and beverage choices as they continue to look for higher value and improved quality. Producers must provide products that retailers believe will satisfy these demands, so it's critical that they understand the end consumers' needs and invest in new markets and offerings to meet them. These higher consumer demands also create opportunities for producers to positively impact their communities and markets by producing healthy products in an environmentally friendly way.

When we consider this year's award recipients, it is very clear that these Canadian producers understand where their industries and markets are evolving and trending. Whether it is new sustainability processes and products, leading-edge marketing and product development, or wellness initiatives that significantly enhance the healthy choices available to consumers, the companies we are recognizing this year are setting a very high bar. Their efforts are also producing impressive financial results, as many of them are experiencing significant growth and are expecting these positive results to continue well into the future.

On a broader basis, these companies provide us with inspirational examples of the ability of Canadian producers to meet the significant challenges that businesses of all shapes and sizes face in today's world, while also demonstrating the strength of the Canadian food and beverage industry. As a firm dedicated to serving this industry here in Canada, and around the globe, we feel very privileged to introduce you to these 2018 food and beverage leaders.

James Menzies, National Manufacturing Leader  
Grant Thornton LLP [www.GrantThornton.ca/Manufacturing](http://www.GrantThornton.ca/Manufacturing)



2018  
LEADERSHIP  
AWARDS



Nina and  
Otari Kobalia

**FOUNDED:** 2011

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
COQUITLAM, BC

**PRODUCTS:**

ORGANIC, NON-GMO,  
GLUTEN-FREE, RAW,  
VEGAN AND YEAST FREE  
GRANOLA, BREADS,  
COOKIES, ENERGY BARS,  
ORGANIC SINGLE  
BARS AND ORGANIC  
VEGAN SPREAD

photo: Don Young Photography

## Glutenull | RISING STAR AWARD | *By Deanna Rosolen*

Otari Kobalia, like many newcomers to Canada, came from his native country of Georgia with a family and little English. Back home he was a mathematician and taught at the university, but it was difficult starting over in Canada during the late 1990s.

Kobalia says he had made some changes in his life and returned to them in Canada — meditation, yoga and food, specifically baking. Baking, he says, “was a kind of salvation for me.” He didn’t have a background in baking, but that didn’t stop him from launching European Breads Bakery in 2001 in Vancouver, to great success. Local reviews and the support of the community gave Kobalia inspiration and courage to keep at it, says his daughter Nina.

Around 2007, Kobalia began to hear about gluten-free. He also received a request from a customer who asked if Kobalia could make a gluten-free bread for his son, piquing Kobalia’s curiosity. The first gluten-free bread the baker

made was a buckwheat bread, and says Kobalia, it was “as strong as a rock. But people liked it.”

By April 2011, the bakery went completely gluten free. “I thought OK, let me start this gluten-free bakery because it could be really something important for people and important for me to create a really healthy product,” says Kobalia. After selling European Breads Bakery, Kobalia launched Glutenull, a gluten-free, vegan, organic, yeast-free, non-GMO certified bakery.

Nina joined the company in 2017, and today the pair oversee a thriving business. The company just expanded its facility, has 14 employees and produces 25 different gluten-free products. Glutenull also produces a low-carbohydrate cookie that it sells in The Low Carb Grocery, and is coming out with a line of macha cookies.

According to Kobalia, part of the company’s success has been its unique

recipes, some based on Georgian recipes passed down through generations, such as gozinaki and churchkhela, with the same taste in a healthier form. Their breads are also unique in that they don’t use yeast — or the ingredients that help mimic the missing yeast and gluten. As Kobalia explains, to create a yeast-free product other manufacturers will add sugar, milk or eggs (or all three) into their gluten-free products to create the characteristics of gluten. Glutenull also doesn’t add refined sugar, but uses coconut sugar or agave syrup.

Nina says her dream is to see Glutenull grow and expand its reach even further. The company has grown its sales 40 per cent year over year, and recently signed on with a distributor to help with expansion on the East Coast, and another distributor to help them expand into the U.S. “We’re expanding quite quickly, thanks to Otari and all his hard work in the beginning,” she says. 🍓



Ian Adamson and Michael Curry

# Greenbelt Microgreens

By Deanna Rosolen

photos: Cathy Longo

Ian Adamson was in the greenhouse business long before he started experimenting with microgreens — smaller, more nutrient-dense versions of mature plants. He had been growing potted plants, herbs and some vegetables, and by 2004 Adamson felt confident enough with his crop of microgreens to start selling them.

Michael Curry, who today is vice-president at Greenbelt Microgreens, had been tracking what Adamson was up to. Curry worked in a private equity business that invested in sustainable agriculture and healthy food companies. He says he came across Greenbelt Microgreens about nine years ago, and in 2016 he invested in the company to help it buy a larger greenhouse near Hamilton, Ont. And while Adamson had his microgreens in 125 independent retailers and Whole Foods, Curry took on the role of getting the products into Loblaw's, Longos and Sobeys.

The new 3.5-acre greenhouse (the

previous was one acre) has undergone several changes over the last two years. “We’ve invested millions of dollars into it,” says Curry, including “putting on a new Acrylite roof...which has been amazing for our yield improvement and our crop cycle.” He adds that they put in LED lights to supplement for those periods of low sunlight during the year, and Curry explains that the LED lights ensure “the crop cycle continues throughout the year.” The company also installed 21 automated watering booms, an automated seeding line, and harvesting technology that Curry says “uses a bandsaw blade or reciprocating scissors for the finer microgreens.”

This automation has helped the company increase the shelf life of its microgreens. Another point of success is the fact that the microgreens are grown in soil, which Curry says is “really the key to this business; growing in soil makes for a much stronger, healthier plant that is much more nutrient dense.”



The shelf life of their microgreens has increased to 13 days, from five to seven days. According to Curry, “most microgreen growers are on farms, small operations growing in soil, but they wouldn’t have the automation. The shelf life they’re getting wouldn’t be as long as ours. Or with hydroponics, where it’s water-based, you wouldn’t get the longer shelf life.”

The investments have certainly paid off. Curry says the company has grown 150 per cent from 2016 to 2017, and they expect to grow 80 per cent this year. They’ve also recently expanded through a partnership with a greenhouse in BC, where the company’s approach to growing microgreens has been replicated. In turn, the greenhouse has started selling to grocery chains in BC under the Greenbelt Microgreens brand. According to Curry, it’s a model they’re taking to New York State, and they’re in talks with greenhouses in Georgia and Florida. There’s even been interest from greenhouses in Mexico, Europe and India. 🍷

**FOUNDED:** 2004

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
LYNDEN, ONT.

**PRODUCTS:**  
MICROGREENS, MICROGREEN  
SALADS

# Greenhouse Juice Company ULC

By Deanna Rosolen



(L-R) Emma Knight, Anthony Green and Hana James

Emma Knight, Anthony Green and Hana James, the founders of Greenhouse Juice Company, launched the cold-pressed juice company on a cold day in the middle of a Toronto winter. The event was taking place out at their 300-sq.-ft. shop, and with word “cold” right in the name of their product, the founders weren’t really sure how many consumers were going to show up.

In spite of the cold, and much to their surprise, says Knight, they sold out of products in an hour. This was after a long night of hand-pressing all the fruit and vegetables into glass bottles themselves. “Our community turned out in record numbers,” says Knight. “It was word of mouth, and Instagram was just taking off and our glass bottles are quite photogenic. There was a market in Toronto that was ready for a product of this nature.”

The city was so ready that the company also sold out of product on the second and third day, and says Knight, they were

looking for a bigger production facility “pretty quickly.” Today Greenhouse Juice operates out of a 35,000-sq.-ft. facility in Mississauga, Ont. with its head office in downtown Toronto. The company has grown sales each year they’ve been in operation, and today they have 16 stores throughout the Greater Toronto Area (GTA), a GTA-wide direct-to-consumer delivery service, and a network of wholesale and foodservice partners across the province.

The team has also been busy developing a Light Filtration technology, which it launched last fall, that will give its products six times their current shelf life without affecting taste and nutrition, thereby allowing the company to further distribution. Knight says the company will expand across Ontario and into Quebec in coming months, with cross-country coverage by the end of 2018, and entry into the U.S. in 2019. The technology uses light (cold UV-C rays

of 254-nanometer wavelength) and advanced fluid dynamics to dramatically reduce microbiological load and stop microorganisms from multiplying.

Referring to it as Greenhouse 2.0, Knight says the first products using the new technology included a new generation of cold-pressed juices, Probiotic Hydrators and Probiotic Tonics. The company has also just introduced an organic booster line — potent and concentrated shots — and will be offering a line of high-protein, satiating shakes.

Greenhouse Juice also has a mandate to make its products more accessible, something that has meant looking for operating efficiencies and using those savings to lower the cost of the beverages. “Over the last couple of years we appreciate that need to be more accessible,” says Knight. “We’ve been striving for efficiency that will allow us to reduce our price point and increase our geographical reach. It’s just a persistent pursuit to find a better way of doing things.” 🍏

**FOUNDED:** 2014

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
TORONTO, ONT.

**PRODUCTS:**  
COLD-PRESSED JUICES,  
PROBIOTIC TONICS, PROBIOTIC  
HYDRATORS, BOOSTERS, NUT  
MILKS, AND SHAKES

# Siwin Foods Ltd.

By Carolyn Cooper



**FOUNDED:** 2005

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
EDMONTON, ALTA.

**PRODUCTS:**  
POTSTICKERS,  
DUMPLINGS, MEAT AND  
SAUSAGE PRODUCTS

Gord DeJong

photos: Siwin Foods

Being in the heart of meat country is definitely an advantage when you're launching a food company. In fact, it was "the abundance of high-quality meat products" in Alberta that prompted the launch of Siwin Foods in Edmonton, says vice-president Gord DeJong. "We believed that it only made sense to add value to these products right here where they're raised."

Siwin's journey began in 2005 when it became the first tenant of the Leduc, Alta. Food Processing Development Centre (FPDC), with the aim of joining its emerging Agrivalue Processing Business Incubator initiative. Siwin Foods — whose parent company is in China — worked with the FPDC to redevelop traditional Asian recipes to better suit Canadian tastes and health demands, including removing MSG and lowering fat, sodium and sugar levels. The company also focused on sourcing all of its ingredients and materials locally, and remaining loyal to its suppliers, "providing maximum benefit to the local community with least impact to the environment," says DeJong.

"What makes our product stand out

the most is the flavour," says DeJong. "The other thing is the value. With a focus on high-quality products with exceptional flavours, the Siwin brand became popular rather quickly," he recalls, noting that Siwin's products soon displaced imported products in the same category. This strong following allowed the company to expand its domestic reach and its lineup. Starting with sausages, dumplings and potstickers, Siwin now also offers naturally smoked Ring Sausages, Smokies, Asian Sausages, Filipino Longanisa and Tosino Sausages, and Stir Fry Sizzlers — marinated meats that allow home cooks to prepare Asian recipes in minutes.

The past four years has seen tremendous growth for Siwin Foods, which has expanded from fewer than 20 employees to more than 80. In 2014 Siwin opened a federally inspected, state-of-the-art processing plant, allowing it to expand processing capacity and product lines, and designed so that its production space can eventually be doubled and throughput tripled. "We're willing to invest in the future," explains DeJong. "So we really wanted a facility that



would promote food safety, and have the efficiency needed in order to be competitive in this marketplace, to have world-class audits done, and be able to export into different parts of the world."

Siwin's products are now found coast-to-coast through major retailers, and this January it hit another milestone when it began exporting sausages to Japan. "Canadian products are viewed as quality products," says DeJong, adding that the company is also hoping to enter the Chinese market. "Our target in China will be consumers with disposable income who prefer to buy products that are imported into the country vs. homegrown. So that's an opportunity for us." ●

**FOUNDED:** 1940

**HEADQUARTERS:**  
THORNLOE, ONT.

**PRODUCTS:**  
CHEDDAR, CURDS,  
BUTTER AND HANDMADE  
ARTISANAL CHEESE  
USING LOCAL MILK

Pam Hamel, brand ambassador for Thornloe Cheese, and farmer Steve Runnalls with his grass-fed herd.

# Thornloe Cheese Inc.

**COMMUNITY & INDUSTRY LEADERSHIP AWARD** | *By Carolyn Cooper*

Since 1940, Thornloe Cheese has been making cheese from the high-quality milk produced in Ontario's Temiskaming agricultural region. But it wasn't until the impending closure of the processing plant in 2006 that the cheesemaker really came into its own as the "Pride of the North."

Faced with the loss of the facility, a group of area farmers and Gencor — a farmer-owned genetics company (now called EastGen) — purchased Thornloe Cheese in 2007. After upgrading the facility to improve efficiency and save water and energy, the company set out to diversify its portfolio of Cheddar and curds to include artisanal and fine cheeses inspired by the region's heritage. As a result, Thornloe dramatically improved its financial performance and sales, and is now one of the largest milk processors in Northern Ontario. As a vital part of the area's economy, Thornloe supports 44 local dairy operations, and processes more than three million litres of milk annually.

A key reason for Thornloe's success is its award-winning Cheddars and specialty cheeses. "The heritage cheeses celebrate the local landscape and the farming community that has existed since the turn of the 20th century in

Temiskaming," says brand ambassador Pam Hamel. "A mandate for the company is to create new products and name them as part of the terroir." In 2017 the company's prizewinning Devil's Rock Creamy Blue Cheese — inspired in name and shape by the region's iconic Devil's Rock cliff formation — was one of three cheeses chosen by the Dairy Farmers of Canada to commemorate the country's 150th anniversary.

Last year Thornloe also launched Canada's first Dairy Farmers of Ontario-verified domestic line of grass-fed cheese after working with local farmers to develop a grass-fed production system. As well as having proven nutritional benefits, Hamel says grass-fed cheese is "richer and creamier, and the colour tones can change throughout the season. The taste can have clover notes to it, and a little bit goes a long way."

Thornloe expects to sell more than 100,000 kg of its premium grass-fed mozzarella and mild and medium Cheddars each year, in addition to its conventional cheeses. "Canadians are looking for healthier, authentic, traceable, product," says Hamel, noting that the grass-fed products have seen significant interest from retailers. The company also



recently launched Temiskaming Valley grass-fed butter, with plans to produce over 100,000 kg annually using an additional 2.73 million litres of milk from Northern Ontario producers.

In the past three years Thornloe Cheese has nearly tripled its sales outside of Northern Ontario, and now retails across Canada, as well as selling to wholesale and foodservice customers. New products that recognize the region are also on the horizon. "The community has done so much for Thornloe, so how could we not do something for it in return?" says business administrator Lace Laframboise. "So we continue to acknowledge the local agricultural area and support the farmers as much as possible." 🍎