

Steady as She Goes

As Bama Cos.' CEO, Paula Marshall has built a global operation through care, accountability and a keen eye for long-term gains.

BY JOANIE SPENCER

Life has a funny way of giving gifts that are packaged as challenges. For Paula Marshall, CEO of Tulsa, OK-based The Bama Cos., everything is a gift if one has faith...and the courage to dig deep enough to find it.

As a granddaughter of Cornelia Alabama "Bama" Marshall — Bama Cos.' matriarch and co-founder — Marshall has the proverbial flour running through her veins. Her grit, determination and unwavering high standards are inherent in her DNA as well.

"My dad nicknamed me 'Bama Two,'" Marshall recalled. "He saw characteristics like determination and [my grandmother's] work ethic in me. Those were the things he loved about his mom, and he loved seeing me exhibit them in the plant. I've heard so many stories about her, and from what I hear, I think I carry on a lot of her traits. What she stood for are the things I stand for too, though maybe in different ways."

Life changes steered Marshall down a path that led her to work in the bakery instead of traveling the world and learning about new cultures, as she'd once dreamed of doing when she was younger.

"You dream of things when you're 16 or 17, and then life changes," she said. "But I look back now, and I see divine intervention."



All photos courtesy of Bama Cos.

In Marshall's career, the turning points are where she leaves her mark.

The opportunity to step into leadership of the business came sooner than she'd expected. In truth, it may be more accurate to say it was unexpected. But Marshall's grit comes from treating challenges not as something to push back on but something to face head on, and when thrown toward the top of the ladder, she landed on her feet.

"That's how it is for me," she said. "I try to tell people I work with or mentor that you have to take every assignment. You can't just pick and choose because you'll never know if you chose the right thing."

That mentality came in handy as she dabbled in nearly every aspect of the business, from operations to sales. The company — which is known for being McDonald's first pie manufacturer — also dabbled in different business markets including retail CPG. Marshall learned through experience that taking every project doesn't mean keeping every project. Oftentimes, it simply provides the context for knowing which jobs are the right ones for the business.

Although pie production is highly specialized, the core competency — high-speed dough production — lends itself to creating a diverse lineup of other baked goods. Identifying that led to Marshall's first sales pivot: selling off the CPG business and diversifying production of dough-based items.

"In 1997, we had an opportunity to delve into frozen dough for pizza, and it became my account," she said. "I knew it had potential to really grow the business, and I told my dad we just needed the capital and the space to build."

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Paula Marshall | CEO | Bama Cos.

From there, Marshall has taken Bama Cos. from high-speed pie production to one of the most highly rated bakery suppliers to the QSR market, both domestically and abroad, for customers including McDonald's, the Yum! Brands portfolio and more.

Identifying new opportunities based on operational excellence is where growth begins, but maintaining relationships is how the business lasts. In foodservice, relationships are the brand.

"To be a good partner, there has to be a relationship," Marshall said. "Everything's built around a four-, five-, six-year relationship. And within that, we'll spend time developing new products, talking about different things we can make, investing in new ingredients, efficiency gains, or even entire production lines. It's a trusted relationship that builds those types of discussions."



WATCH NOW:

Paula Marshall explains how strong customer relationships lead to opportunities for long-term innovation.

Steering away from retail and leaning into foodservice was not only pivotal in Bama's growth and expansion, but it also illuminated ways Marshall and her teams have been able to innovate with the customer base.

"Making product and packaging it in beautiful boxes for retail shelves is difficult to execute," Marshall said. "In my business, we're putting frozen products in a box — we're talking 50,000 to 75,000 pies an hour — and shipping it to an end customer who can then bake it. These are the companies that are growing."

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

"We're seeing innovation coming from customer input around what they want to see coming off the lines," she said.

Over the years, Marshall has seen several iterations of apple pie innovation, ranging from the baked pie of the '90s to the more modern lattice-topped pies with larger fruit chunks. Above all, demand for clean-label products has driven innovation that could not be achieved without trust and open dialogue between Bama and its customers.

As technology and consumer access to information progress, the rapidity of trend cycles is tighter than ever. For Marshall, it means not only being willing to listen to customers but also being ready to act.

Much of Bama's customer base is focused on clean-label products, enabling the company to stay ahead of the game, so to speak. But Marshall knows that things happen quickly these days, and the product developers who are in tune with — and stay in front of — the pendulum swings will remain successful.

"Over the past few years, I've maintained an awareness for how the trend cycles are changing," she said. "I think there's going to be a lot of information coming out about different ingredients, and we're going to see more change coming. Obviously, an apple pie has to taste like an apple pie, and it has to be delicious, but we have to be ready to adapt based on demand around how products are made."

While consumers are mostly the ones driving the speed of change in terms of product development, Marshall is also keeping a close eye on how the labor landscape has evolved. With workforce woes still permeating the industry, she believes that automation is only part of the solution.

"The technology we, as an industry, have invested in to solve the people shortages still requires people who know how to run it," she said. "Innovation is happening really fast in that regard, and we need to be careful not to outstrip the technical capabilities of our people. If technology outpaces people's ability to know how to use it, then it's no longer solving the problem we needed it to solve."

Training on the machines is incredibly important, but for Marshall, there's no substitute for having people in the plant who are not only knowledgeable but who also care about what they're doing.

That's where the hard and soft skills intersect, and it's inherent in the Bama Cos. mission: "People helping people be successful." That's accomplished through care and accountability, and for Marshall, these are the two most critical factors in bringing the mission to life.

In the baking industry — and the business world — Marshall has a reputation for

building Bama's culture into a place where people not only want to work but they're also inspired to give their best.

"When you put caring with accountability, it brings a balance," she said. "As humans, we need accountability; otherwise, things can go off the rails pretty quickly. But caring is not a sign of weakness. We take a big interest in what's going on with our people. If we see they're stumbling, we're there for them."

With more than 1,000 employees in the US and abroad, Marshall sees every team member as an extension of the family.

In fact, through a collaboration with Marshall's daughter and stepson, Bama transformed an underutilized building into the Bama Caring Center (BCC), equipped with classrooms and HR offices, as well as a counseling center, medical clinic and legal aid, to assist with a range of personal challenges employees might be facing. Other benefits also include tuition reimbursement and profit sharing



To support Bama's mission of "People helping people be successful," Marshall collaborated with her daughter and stepson to create the Bama Caring Center, equipped with classrooms, a counseling center, medical clinic and more.



Marshall can often be found sharing her leadership insights at speaking engagements. She always advises the people she mentors to take every opportunity that comes their way.

for manufacturing team members, but the BCC yields the best intangible ROI.

"For what I consider to be not a huge financial investment, this has been considered the No. 1 team member benefit," Marshall said. "Whenever I ask a team member, 'What do you love most about Bama?' They always say the BCC and the clinic."

Make no mistake. Care is not charity, and the resources available in the BCC are considered an exchange for work well done. Guard rails are in place to keep the operation running smoothly.

"There are things that have to be done," Marshall said. "You have to be here; you have to be on time. We are a crew, and we need everyone on the line supporting one another. If there's a problem, we'll help you get through it, and we encourage open conversations. But working here and enjoying those benefits means meeting expectations."

Through the care and accountability philosophy, Marshall maintains a long-term view of the Bama workforce.

"When we are willing to help them, they're willing to do their jobs at a high level and make great products for our customers," she said. "To me, it makes perfect sense, and it's how we've been able to retain talent, sometimes for 20 or 30 years."

Growing up with the stories of Cornelia Alabama's matriarchy, Marshall might not have imagined being a matriarch of change herself. Nonetheless, she's carried on a legacy that was passed down from her grandmother to her father and on to her with grace, compassion and an unyielding commitment to quality through innovation.

Perhaps Cornelia Alabama never imagined her handheld pies becoming a global company, either. But here it is, supporting foodservice operators with pies, pizza crust, breads and more through its US operation and Bama Europa — the recent UK acquisition — as well as operations in China and Poland.

"We put Bama on the map," Marshall said. "That has been pretty amazing to accomplish for my family."

For her, in fact, it's the **greatest gift of all.** CB