

From garage to the globe: Local entrepreneurs set tables internationally

By Todd Fieldling



Two local entrepreneurs have started a tableware business that reaches local vendors and vendors across the globe.

Co-presidents and brothers Scott Hamburger, 37, of Reston, and Eric Hamburger, 39, of Ashburn, founded Fortessa, a business specializing in tableware, in 1993.

With 170 employees and associates worldwide, in 2008 Fortessa's products appear in venues in 20 countries, company officials said. Fortessa's operations in the United States include its headquarters and direct-to-consumer outlet in Sterling, a foreign trade-zone warehouse in Winchester, a regional headquarters in Las Vegas, Nev. and showrooms throughout the country.

Fortessa's international operations include Fortessa of Canada; Fortessa of Europe, based in Germany; Fortessa (Asia) Ltd., based in Hong Kong; and a partnership in Mexico.

How did Fortessa begin?

Scott: Eric and I are the children of entrepreneurs, so for us it was never a question of whether to start a business. It was just a question of what kind of business it was going to be and we were in college at the time.

You started Fortessa literally in a garage and it eventually grew into what it is today?

Scott: It was at my parent's house.

What year?

Scott: We started the business in 1993, and Eric had been doing some traveling overseas, he made some contacts and identified some opportunities and we decided to get involved in some international trade. We focused on tableware because we identified some inefficiency in channels of distribution. We found a great supplier in Germany that was not in the U.S. market, and it was an opportunity to bring a new product to market.

Was the name of that product Fortessa?

Scott: That product was Eschenbach porcelain and that was our original supplier.

Are they Fortessa's supplier?

Scott: They are gone. We created the Fortessa brand in 2000 after the business has grown and matured. We diversified our product offering. We were selling more than just German porcelain, which is where we started. So we wanted a brand that was more of an umbrella for all the different products that we offer. ... Also we wanted a brand that conveyed a certain sense of style and also a certain strength and solidity in the market in Fortessa that we were looking for.

In Fortessa, are these all items that you designed?

Scott: We are a designer, a developer and a marketer of tableware, which means everything from the product concept to the delivery to the customer, so we integrate the entire process.

What is the scope of your business?

Scott: We don't disclose our revenue figures. I would certainly describe us as a mid-sized company. ... We sell to ... hotels, clubs, resorts, restaurants, etc.

So people can't come into a store and buy products?

Scott: The outlet store, sure, but only if you live in the immediate area. We have an outlet store in this facility, which is open to the public, in Sterling.

What is your favorite part of the business?

Eric: I like all of it. I focus on the product development.

What is that?

Eric: Working with factories, setting specifications [of the tableware].

What do you think is neat about tableware?

Eric: We grew up with a household with a lot of emphasis on meals together.

Where do you see the business going in five or 10 years?

Eric: We would continue focusing at what we are good at.