

# FOOD BIZ Confections from heaven

by James Scalzitti

Although she wasn't born Italian, Jamie Ann Zorn has been familiar with the Italian sugar-coated confections known as confetti for most of her life. A traditional part of Italian weddings, Communions and baptisms, these candies are also well known to Greeks, which is Zorn's family background.

After marrying a man from Sulmona, Abruzzo — home to world-renowned Confetti Pelino — Zorn's love and appreciation of the candies blossomed. She would fill her suitcases with candy whenever the couple visited family in Sulmona, bringing the precious cargo back to family and friends in the United States.

After she was laid off from Deloitte and Touche a few years ago, Zorn was advised by her husband to turn her passion into her profession and go into business with the Pelino family.

Zorn did just that, and her Chicago-based company, Confetti Pelino & Bomboniere USA, has emerged as the exclusive U.S. distributor for the House of Pelino.

The individual candies, also known as Italian sugared almonds, are the confetti. The custom-designed favors, in which the confetti are arranged to resemble flowers, are the bomboniere. The candies are manufactured by hand in a four-day process that dates back three centuries. No flour or other starches are added, making these unique confections both delicious and truly authentic.

While confetti was first created in Italy, other Mediterranean and Middle Eastern groups, including the Greeks and Lebanese, also enjoy these unique treats.

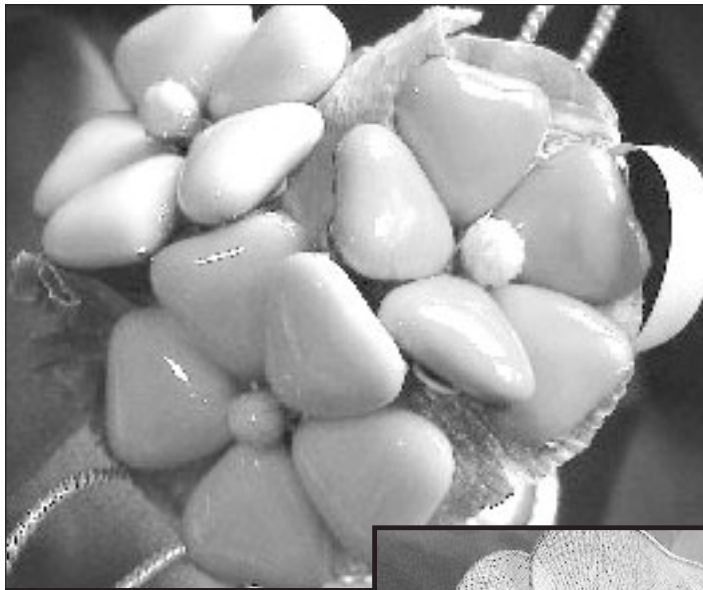
"I was familiar with the tradition since I was a young girl," she says. She became reacquainted with the candies after her husband brought her a box when he returned to Chicago from a trip home to Sulmona in 1998.

Zorn believes that there may have been divine intervention at work.

It was Easter season in 1998, and Zorn was working with other volunteers to ready St. Michael Church in Old Town for Holy Week services. She broke a fingernail while vigorously scrubbing the church, but refrained from swearing because she was in church ... and because she had given up cursing for Lent.

She did, however, utter a mild lamentation in Italian, which she had become fluent in by living and working in Italy. Not far away was Albert, perhaps the only person in the group of volunteers who understood what she had said.

He gently razzed her, in Italian, for her lan-



**An "act of God" brought Chicagoan Jamie Ann Zorn together with her true calling, bringing the best confetti in the world to the U.S. market.**



guage. Drawn together by the common bond of *la lingua nostra*, the two began talking, then dating, and eventually marrying in Sulmona. Today, they are the proud parents of two children, Andreas and Alessia, whom they raise in their Italian-speaking Chicago home.

Given the way in which they met, Zorn says that "we feel on a very wonderful level that God brought us together."

The couple and their children travel regularly to Sulmona to visit family members, and Jamie also travels regularly to Italy on business excursions and to work directly with the Pelino factory on customizing products for her clients.

"We like to work with our customers on a one-on-one basis," she says. "We take great pride in customizing each person's bomboniere to make sure they are exactly what they want for their celebration."

And who are the people ordering bomboniere today? Zorn says that, not unexpectedly, many of them are "the very traditional Italian, either immigrants or first- and second-generation." To this group she also adds those Greeks and Lebanese who are familiar with the confetti and who especially like the elegant artistry of the products made by the Pelino family.

Among the other devotees of these bomboniere are brides hosting upscale weddings;

Italophiles who may have discovered the candies on a trip to Abruzzo; people, not necessarily Italian, who are throwing special celebrations such as baptisms and Communions and want a special memento; and high-end wedding and event planners "who fall in love with our product," according to Zorn.

"It's interesting how people find their way to the Pelino products," she adds.

While it is part of a centuries-old tradition, Zorn isn't about to relegate the confetti legacy to the history books. In addition to working with her clients to update the image of these candies, she is marketing them in a most modern way.

She has a Web site, [www.confettipelino.com](http://www.confettipelino.com), which details the history of the candy and the company, explains which colors are used for what occasions (white for weddings, red for graduations, green for engagements, etc.), showcases pictures of various bomboniere, serves as an online store for the candies.

"I've decided as a distribution strategy to do Internet sales through my Web site," she says, adding that she also maintains a

network of wedding and event planners throughout the United States "who do business through us."

In order to maintain the exclusive nature of the confetti, as well as to ensure that each wedding or event planner thoroughly knows the product, Zorn only contracts with one such person per major market.

The Pelino family's candies "will never be in every store," Zorn says. "We don't want anything that will take away from (the aura of exclusivity) in any way."

Confetti are not everyday confections that you might pop in your mouth while taking in a flick at the local megaplex. They are special candies for special occasions. "They're not inexpensive," Zorn says, "but they're worth it. We're very proud of Pelino: very, very proud."

Having confetti at a special event makes it that much more joyous, and sharing that joy is one of the great perks of Zorn's job. "It's so wonderful to do what I do," she says, "because people are happy, and you're helping to make the occasion more special. This tradition is very important. It's wonderful to see the tradition hasn't been lost."