

# Patio & Hearth PRODUCTS REPORT™

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JANUARY/FEBRUARY 2010

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OXFORD GARDEN

with excellent customer service, and that will not change with the Backyard Store. "We plan on being true to the brand, which means serving the customer in the same fashion that we have in the past, including our white-glove delivery," Sensale says.

Fortunoff Backyard Store offers different price points for many consumer profiles, from the newlywed couple just starting out to the high-end affluent buyer. "We try to cater to all customers' needs, but we always keep in mind that people today are looking for value," Merkur says. While customers are seeking a good buy, they will not sacrifice quality. "There is a difference between having inexpensive furniture and offering a good value on quality furniture, which we feel we offer," he adds.

## SPREADING THE WORD

The Fortunoff Backyard Store will use past proven marketing strategies as it launches its new advertising campaign. That approach will include newspaper, radio, and television ad placement.

In addition, under its licensing agreement, Furniture Concepts has access to all the intellectual property of the Fortunoff outdoor-furniture business. "We have the contacts and mailing list of past Fortunoff customers, and we plan on using this to let these customers know we are back in business and to convey our brand, our product, and our promotional messages," Sensale says.

Rehired Fortunoff employees will also be able to take advantage of their client books to reconnect with past customers. The legendary Fortunoff name has also generated a lot of interest from regional media, whose person-

nel are eager to report on the many facets of the Fortunoff comeback.

## A STRATEGIC ALLIANCE

As head of one of the most successful outdoor chains in the United States, Barish had been planning to expand The Chair King Casual Furniture Stores for a couple of years when Merkur first approached him about investing in the rebirth of the Fortunoff Backyard Store.

"We considered this not only as a good investment, but a strategic one," Barish says. "It provides an ability to take advantage of experts in New York and Texas, whereby we can use our combined efforts to help each other. It is going to be good for both companies, and that is why we made the decision to go forward with it."

Sensale emphasizes the importance of the strategic alliance to the success of Fortunoff Backyard Stores. "Marty and I bring much hard-earned experience and a diverse set of skills to the management of our company. It's why we partnered together. Nevertheless, there are areas where intelligent advice is extremely helpful. No one is an expert everywhere, but we're all looking for the best solution. In David and his team at The Chair King, we have a cadre of people who can offer advice and insights on many fronts," he says.

Merkur adds, "This advice comes from people who have operated a highly successful business, so it's extremely valuable. In our short time together, there are already a number of areas where astute advice has helped us to set up a more efficient operation."

The Chair King and Furniture Concepts will contin-

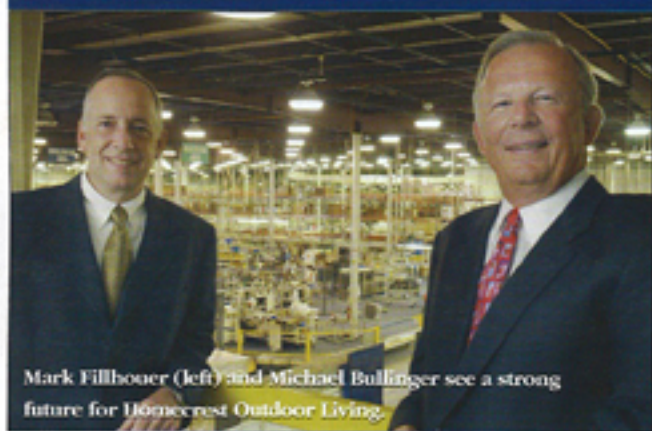
ue to operate separately, although regular daily communication will take place among Barish, Merkur, and Sensale. "As president and chair, I will act in a supervisory capacity, overseeing the investment and helping whenever I can," Barish says. "It's a real partnership in the way we operate. I am very fortunate to have Marty and Bernie there to run the company, along with their executive team of former Fortunoff employees. Every member of it is an expert in his or her field; they know what they are doing."

The Chair King's controlling interest in Furniture Concepts should also instill confidence in companies that might have been affected by the previous bankruptcies. "The Chair King's investment has given more credence to Furniture Concepts and the rebirth of the Fortunoff brand in the New York and New Jersey areas, and to vendors and suppliers who might have been skeptical otherwise," Barish says.

The revitalized Fortunoff Backyard Stores will provide many opportunities—not only for the owners, rehired employees, vendors, and suppliers, but for loyal customers, who can once again experience all the benefits of being Fortunoff shoppers.

"As former Fortunoff executives, Bernie and I are very happy that we are able to employ close to 100 former Fortunoff employees. We take a lot of pride in being able to do that, and with The Chair King's help, we look forward to working with our team to return the Fortunoff Backyard Store to a position of market strength and profitability—to build a business that our customers love and our team is proud to be a part of," Merkur says. ■

## A STRONGER, BETTER HOMECREST *By Sharon Sanders*



Mark Fillhouer (left) and Michael Bullinger see a strong future for Homecrest Outdoor Living.



The Havenhill sling group



The Trenton deep seating collection

Homecrest Outdoor Living has a lot to look forward to as it enters the new decade. After almost closing its doors two years ago, the 53-year-old Wadena, Minnesota-based outdoor-furniture manufacturer has found its footing again and is making some strategic changes to regain its reputation in the industry.

### A FRESH START

In January 2008, Bullinger Enterprises of Fargo, North Dakota, purchased the struggling company (which had gone through two bankruptcies) and gave it the cash infusion needed to bring it back to life. The owner of Bullinger Enterprises, Michael Bullinger, is in the business of helping struggling companies financially so that they can move forward, helping them assemble new management teams while allowing them, at the same time, to stay in their hometowns.

Homecrest was fortunate to be one of those companies. "I think many people in the industry wrote us off, and rightly so," Mark Fillhouer says. Fillhouer is chief operating officer; he left Homecrest prior to the first bankruptcy and then came back, at the urg-

ing of Bullinger. "After everything we've gone through, we now have a company with a great heritage that is really a new startup company," he says. "We lost our way for a little while, but we're back and ready to move forward with a fresh outlook."

### BETTER PRODUCTS AND BETTER SERVICE

Homecrest Outdoor Living is proud to have its original spark back and is taking full advantage of its newfound financial strength to move forward. In the early days, Homecrest was known as an innovative company that built its products to a different standard than that of other manufacturers.

In the 1970s, founder Mert Bottemiller invented the first swivel rocker in an effort to raise the bar on comfort for outdoor furniture. "Innovations like this are what set Homecrest apart," Fillhouer says, adding that his goal is to get the company back to that place. He admits that over the years, Homecrest stopped innovating and let its style get stale. "We did not keep up with what we should have in terms of investing in new designs and new product introductions; we will never be in that place again," he says.

He explains that after getting two strong selling seasons under its belt, Homecrest is regaining dealers' confidence. Its newest collections—which include the Havenhill and Wescott sling groups and the Trenton deep seating collection—are getting good placement on showroom floors. "We have some really exciting things coming out later this year as well," he says.

From a service standpoint, Homecrest is doing things that it hasn't done before to help dealers meet today's market challenges. One program that Fillhouer is particularly excited about is its in-season Quick Ship. "We don't expect retailers to do early buys like they used to," Fillhouer says, adding that it's just not smart, in today's business environment, to put 50% of a whole year's sales in a warehouse and hope that customers buy it.

The Quick Ship program gives dealers the flexibility of purchasing in-season merchandise when they need it. The company started the program last year with a short list of merchandise, and it has expanded the plan for 2010 to include best sellers and new releases. "What we are trying to do is build a program that a dealer can make money on,"

Fillhouer explains.

Because the company is financed well, it doesn't have to go through a factor to finance early buys and give dealers terms. This makes it possible to pass those savings on—in the form of better deals for at-once business. "Down the road, we are going to be able to offer some other services that bigger companies can't offer," Fillhouer says.

### OPPORTUNITIES ON THE HORIZON

Homecrest sees nothing but opportunity ahead as it moves forward with its new business model focused on the dealer. It plans to continue to manufacture high-end casual furniture with an eye toward innovation.

Fillhouer explains that it's a feeling of freedom to know that Homecrest is once again operating on a solid financial footing. "We are taking this freedom seriously and investing in our dealer programs and products. We're going to come up with ways to give consumers furniture with comfort, durability, and easy maintenance that they've never seen before," he says. "All I can say about 2010 and beyond is this: Expect the unexpected." ■



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Circle Reader Service No. 138



## Havenhill

With its contemporary frame design and uniquely flared comfort sling, the Havenhill collection offers a stylish respite in a fast-paced world. Six robust aluminum frames and multiple seating options and styles, as well as countless finishes and fabrics, round out this simple (yet classic) collection, making it the perfect fit for any decor. Contact: [www.homecrest.com](http://www.homecrest.com).

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## Infrared SearMate by Holland

The Infrared SearMate by Holland is a gas-powered infrared searing unit that attaches to all full-size Holland gas grills. Built with an indestructible stainless-steel heat shield and a full-size, heavy-gauge steel lid for protection, the SearMate can boast the same robustness as all Holland grills. Holland Grill customers appreciate the ingenuity necessary to add the value of 900-degree searing easily to the long list of cooking capabilities—without having to buy another complete grill. Contact: (800) 880-9766,

[www.hollandgrill.com](http://www.hollandgrill.com), or (for dealer inquiries) Scott Warner at [swarner@hollandgrill.com](mailto:swarner@hollandgrill.com).

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## Hitzer Models 30-95, 50-93

There is a whole world of reasons to choose the Hitzer Model 30-95 Ez-Flo and Hitzer Model 50-93 Ez-Flo, both manufactured by a Swiss Amish craftsman. These two models are the anthracite-coal-burning industry's leader in self-feeding stoves, require no moving parts to burn, put out up to 95,000 Btu, are environmentally friendly, are U.S. made, and have a

thermostat-control combustion air system. Each model has a large, self-feeding hopper capable of holding from 30 to 50 pounds of coal. Contact: (260) 589-8536 or [www.hitzer.com](http://www.hitzer.com).

Circle Reader Service No. 184



## Tribeca

Tribeca, the engaging new deep seating collection from Homecrest Outdoor Living, features a distinctive double-arc back and arm reminiscent of a garden arbor. Meticulously crafted of a durable aluminum frame paired with plush tailored cushions, Tribeca is available in a variety of Homecrest fabrics and frame finishes. Contact: [www.homecrest.com](http://www.homecrest.com).

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## AERO Market Umbrella

The ZipJack AERO market umbrella changed the look of the classic market umbrella forever. Its patented canopy design gives the umbrella distinctive styling, while crosswinds and updrafts pass right through the canopy's venting system. Easy maintenance enhances its attractiveness. The ZipJack AERO market umbrella can help every specialty patio retailer stand out above the crowd.

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