

# Hemispheres

May 2011

## the big idea

# The King of Queens

After selling vitaminwater for billions, brash New Yorker Mike Repole has set his sights on healthy fast food and upscale cheese puffs and horse racing and.

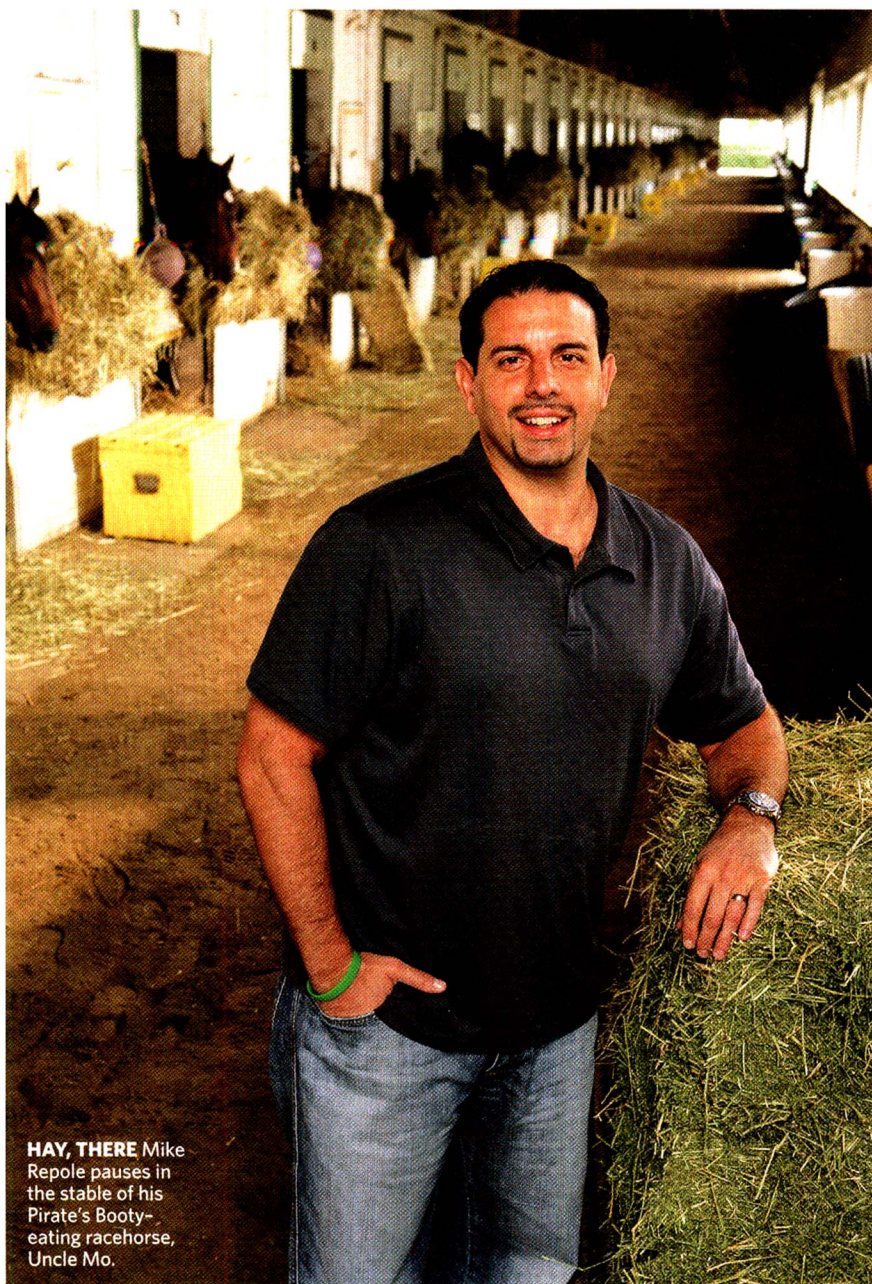
BY CRISTINA ROUVALIS

**MIKE REPOLE** can't sit still, even when he eats. As the fast-talking 42-year-old spills out his plans to revolutionize the fast food industry, his foot taps incessantly, and he checks texts on three separate cell phones. When he comes up for air, he does so just long enough to devour a 338-calorie turkey burger—his company's answer to the Big Mac. Then he bounds to the counter and returns with a smoothie dubbed "The Vaccinator."

Most of the thin, stylish Manhattanites lunching at the no-fry fast food restaurant Energy Kitchen would never guess the muscular guy with the thick Queens accent, Coca-Cola T-shirt and faded jeans is the staggeringly rich cofounder of vitaminwater. Or that he is hard at work building not one but two new brand empires: Energy Kitchen and Pirate's Booty snacks. But he is.

In 2008, Repole bought a majority share in the Energy Kitchen chain for more than a million dollars. "People shouldn't be eating at McDonald's, Burger King and Wendy's," he says. "We are going to be the future of fast food. I'm not afraid of McDonald's."

Sure, go ahead and laugh. At \$6.99 a pop, low-fat turkey and ostrich burgers may not seem like a serious threat to the mighty Big Mac, but "Mike from Queens," as he still styles »



**HAY, THERE** Mike Repole pauses in the stable of his Pirate's Booty-eating racehorse, Uncle Mo.

» himself (though he's since moved to Long Island) has been defying the odds ever since he was a kid with ADHD barely making C's.

The son of a waiter and a seamstress from Italy, Repole grew up in a tight-knit household with a grandmother and aunt who slept on a pullout couch. "I wanted bigger and more," he says. "I wanted nice clothes, and we shopped at the thrift store. I had rubber wheels on my skates, and I wanted metal wheels. My mom would say, 'No, you can't have this.' I'd say, 'Mom, I am going to have it.'"

By age 12, he was poring over *Sports Illustrated* and *Money* magazine, charting his course to fame and fortune. After high school, he studied sports management at St. John's University, squeaking by with a 2.2 grade point average. After a stint as a high school coach, Repole took a job at Crystal Geyser Water Company. He rose fast to vice president, but then that foot of his started tapping again.

In 1997, he met Darius Bikoff, inventor of the distilled energy drink SmartWater. Repole admired Bikoff but sensed the idea was 20 years ahead of its time. So the two hashed out a bridge product: a flavored beverage

spiked with vitamins. Repole wrote the original vitaminwater labels himself, penning lines such as "for best results, refrigerate" and signed them "Mike from Queens." At first, people called the vitaminwater pioneers nuts. Then they sold the company to Coca-Cola in 2007 for \$4.1 billion.

Repole stayed at Coke for a while, but he started itching to build a brand again. At the time he was an Energy Kitchen regular. He loved the no-fry menu, but he suspected the masculine, orange-and-navy decor repelled every potential customer except male gym rats. "I used to joke there was a sign on the door that said, 'No women,'" he says. So he bought the franchise, which at the time consisted of six stores around New York City. Thanks to a makeover, ordered by Repole, the more subtly feminine blue-and-green dining rooms now attract a clientele that is 60 percent female. To eliminate guesswork for weight-conscious diners, including himself, Repole pulled all items over 500 calories from the menu. "I am not a skinny guy," he says. "If I didn't eat this way, I would weigh 400 pounds."

Anthony Leone, who founded Energy Kitchen in 2004, initially pegged the

fast-talking Repole as a vitaminwater salesman. "He would do his focus group of one with me," Leone says. "What's selling? What's not? Who's buying?" Leone, another Queens native, sensed Repole's knack for sussing out brand weaknesses. "The food was good, but the message was incorrect," Leone says. "We had to take four or five steps backward and redo everything." With the aid of a full-time director of franchising, Repole now has 70 new Energy Kitchens under development in Florida, Washington D.C., Massachusetts, Connecticut, New Jersey and New York. He hopes to grow the chain from 10 stores to 1,000 in 10 years.

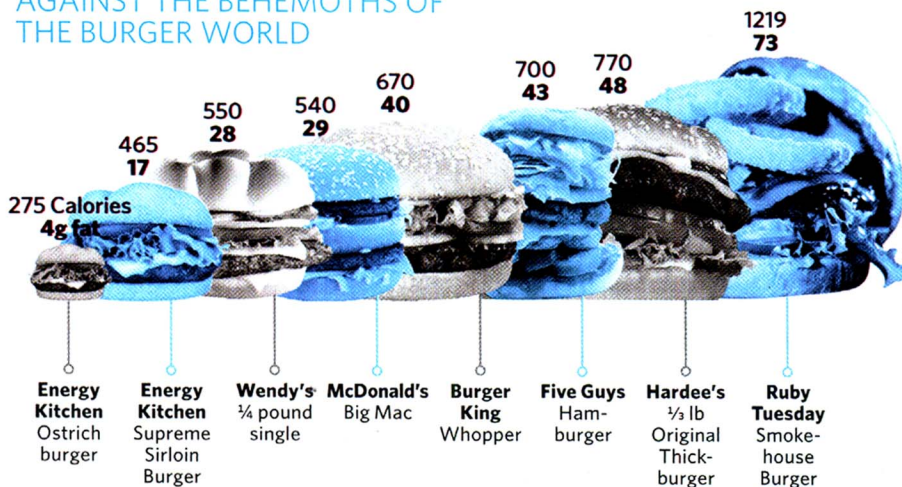
About the same time, he scooped up another health-conscious brand, Pirate's Booty. During his tenure at vitaminwater, Pirate's Booty Aged White Cheddar Puffs had been his favorite snack. He ordered them by the case but wondered why they were so hard to find. Believing the brand could be much bigger, he bought a majority share from founder Robert Ehrlich for an undisclosed sum in the millions in 2008. Within two years, Repole had doubled sales, to \$100 million, expanding the company's offerings into an entire line of healthy snack foods.

And if all that weren't enough to keep him busy, Repole's also gotten into horse racing, a passion since age 12, when he used to place \$2 bets through old gamblers at the track. Unsurprisingly, he's done well in that too. One of his horses, Uncle Mo, claimed the 2010 Champagne Stakes and Breeders' Cup Juvenile and is now a favorite for the 2011 Kentucky Derby. What's the secret? "I put Aged White Cheddar in my hand and Uncle Mo gobbles it right up," he says.

People often ask Repole why he's still hustling instead of relaxing in the Caribbean, but relaxing's not in his makeup. "People who meet me think I'm a little psychotic," he says. "My mind is always racing. I've been anxious my whole life—but not afraid."

## The Weigh-In

HOW ENERGY KITCHEN FARES AGAINST THE BEHEMOTHS OF THE BURGER WORLD



Despite her best efforts to eat vegetables, **CRISTINA ROVALIS** is a sucker for french fries and Twizzlers.