

GLUTEN-FREE MARKET LEADS TO EXPANDING BUSINESS

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There is no doubt that a segment of consumers are becoming more particular about what is in (and not in) their food. Whether based on scientific reality or the whims of fad diets, there is a clear and growing portion of the market seeking out and paying more for healthier food. Jennifer Saunders has built her Around the World Gourmet business around an important niche within this sector of the market.

After graduating from Ohio State University in 1999, the Belmont County native found herself doing a number of different jobs in the areas of finance, budgets, accounting and economic development. Among her jobs was teaching hopeful entrepreneurs how to develop successful business plans.

"I thought to myself, 'Why am I just teaching this? Why am I not doing it?'" Saunders said. "That's how Around the World Gourmet got started."

Around the World Gourmet, Inc., started in 2005 as a business dedicated to manufacturing award winning gluten-free, trans-fat-free, all-natural, specialty foods that began with lines of salsas, dipping sauces, marinades, salad dressings and Buffalo wing sauces that meld different tastes from around the world.

While those interested in health foods in general are an important part of the market for Around the World Gourmet, Saunders is really trying to cater to those who do not have a choice but to eat gluten-free products – the 1% of Americans with Celiac disease. When Celiac disease sufferers eat foods that contain gluten, it creates an immune-mediated toxic reaction that does not allow food to be properly absorbed, according to the Celiac Disease Foundation.

"Gluten is a protein in wheat, rye and barely that affects the small intestines of those with Celiac disease and they can't absorb nutrients in their food," Saunders said. "This is permanent and there is no cure. The only treatment is a life-long glutenfree diet."

Around the World Gourmet products are also important for those with gluten intolerance, wheat allergies and others who simply do not want to eat gluten. And, as her business began to grow, Saunders began to see the need, and additional sales opportunities, for more gluten-free products for a hungry market.

The quality of life for those who must remove gluten from their diets is substantially lowered and it has been estimated that 15% to 25% of consumers desire gluten-free foods, Saunders said.

"I started talking with more people who had this disease and they just loved the products I had, but they really missed good sandwich bread," Saunders said. "Gluten is the magic ingredient in bread. It makes bread light and fluffy. Bread without gluten tends to be dry and dense."

With this goal in mind, Saunders went to work trying to develop tasty gluten-free bread products. Around the World Gourmet now offers Italian gluten-free biscuits, loaf bread and dinner rolls, which have been met with a positive response.

"I have had people come up to me and thank me for my bread because it was finally something that their child liked to eat that was gluten free," Saunders said.

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To further improve her products, Saunders has worked with researchers at Ohio State University to develop better batter for her bread. Saunders approached Ohio State for help in development of a “gluten replacement” in bakery products, which is still a work in progress. Initial research was conducted to characterize the physicochemical changes in gluten-free batter and its ingredients. Saunders is currently developing gluten-free pasta, tortillas and pizza crusts to add to her offerings. She also has worked with OSU Extension through the South Centers at Piketon and the Entrepreneur Signature Program (ESP), which is funded by the \$1.6 billion Ohio Department of Development Third Frontier Initiative.

The ESP focuses on technology-based sectors that have the potential to become important economic prospects for Ohio, and the South Centers signature area is Agbioscience technology. This program provides clients access to resources to help develop their agricultural ideas or inventions and is designed to help farmers or inventors take an agricultural idea to the marketplace.

In the case of Saunders, ESP helped fund Around the World Gourmet's technology-based bioscience research project that will help continue her goal of finding a “gluten replacement” for bakery products. Once developed, the finished products will generate increased revenue and as a result create job opportunities in Ohio.

Saunders also works with the Center for Innovative Food Technology (CIFT) in Toledo in developing and marketing her products. Another important partner for Saunders has been The Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) in Athens that helps entrepreneurs build networks, support innovation and facilitate collaboration with other regional businesses to boost the economy. She is a part of the Ohio Proud program as well.

Saunders makes her products in the Ohio State Food Industry Center pilot plant facilities that meet safety and sanitation needs and offer up-to-date equipment. When developing her new products, Saunders first works on some general recipe formulations then does some initial sensory evaluations by simply having people try the products. From there she further refines the recipes and conducts additional sensory evaluations (using volunteers with Celiac Disease). With a more finalized product she works to determine the shelf life, develop the packaging and labeling, and finally the marketing of the products.

“I really don't have a problem selling the products. Some people just hear ‘gluten free’ and they like the packaging so they buy it,” she said. “I do want to try to get into more stores to reach more people and I am hiring some interns to help me expand what I'm doing. There are headaches with marketing and logistics, but I love providing a product that is healthy and that tastes good.”

The technological and financial assistance from ACEnet, ESP and CIFT have been vital for the initial success of Around the World Gourmet.

“All of the grants and assistance are helping me to get my business to the next level,” she said. “These groups have all been great to work with. Without them I would still be working at a finance job behind a desk.”

For the future, Saunders wants to expand her product offerings further and look into securing more local ingredients. “I am getting most of my ingredients now from distributors and I would like to use more local ingredients from Ohio farmers. Eventually I would like to come up with my own gluten-free flour and bakery mixes that people can take home and bake as well as create frozen lunches or entrees that represent different cultures around the world,” she said. “I like being innovative and working to offer exciting new products. If you don't have the innovation, you won't be in business very long.”

Around the World Gourmet products are available all around Ohio.

Author/From the desk of Matt Reese