

Small Kosher Businesses Rise to the Challenge

by Erica Lamberg

As president of her own business, Mary Anne Jackson knows first hand how business owners struggle in the business world, especially the kosher foods industry. Jackson's company, My Own Meals (847/ 948-1118), is a Deerfield, Illinois-based manufacturer of fully-cooked glatt kosher meals with no refrigeration needed.

Back in 1987, My Own Meals became the recognized creator of the children's meals market with its line of natural meals specifically developed for the taste and nutritional needs of children ages 2-10. The products were sold through grocery stores and by mail order throughout the United States. Organizations such as the Feingold Association which recommends products to parents of hyperactive and allergy-prone children, the American Dietetics Association, the Public Voice and others became supporters of the new emphasis on nutrition and taste for children, instead of just fun.

Jackson said that in late 1993, My Own Meals introduced kosher My Own Meal brand adult meals, and added certification to its children's line. "At this point in time we made the business decision to convert our business from producing children's meals to producing adult kosher entrees. We wanted to make our business more of a niche for kosher consumers," she said.

Every main course kosher meal is fully cooked. It can be reheated in its container and eaten without any further preparation. Unlike freeze-dried or dehydrated foods, not even water is required to be added. When stored below

80F, a My Own Meal main course meals remain "fresh" for approximately 24 months from production for plastic trays and up to five years from production in foil pouches.

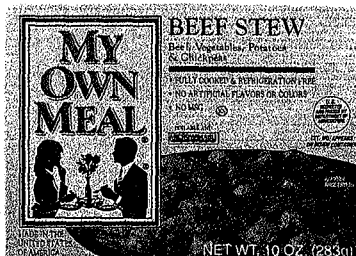
The meals are manufactured under the strictest orthodox rabbinical supervision of Rabbis Aaron and Moshe Soloveichik - Organization of Orthodox Kashruth Supervision

of Chicago. Jackson feels that at times, her products are deliberately kept out of certain markets, which she calls "political," but the good news is that she sells direct as well. Although she faces many obstacles, Ms. Jackson says that company profits are significantly up and believes the business will continue to thrive.

Business challenges also face Twin Marquis, an Asian noodle and wrapper manufacturer. When Twin Marquis (718/ 386-6868) was established in 1989 it was housed in a 3,000 square foot facility and currently the factory has expanded to 23,000 square feet. According to its president, Alice Mok, the Brooklyn-based company has one current obstacle, its search for a suitable location to build an additional facility. Another successful product line of the company is "Chef One," which are Asian appetizers such as dumplings and egg rolls. "We would like to expand our appetizers to include meat but the set-up costs are too much and it's very expensive for Kosher meat," explained Mok. Most Twin Marquis products are available at Asian grocery stores as well as mainstream supermarkets. Twin Marquis also enjoys a thriving wholesale business servicing restaurants, institutions, and food manufacturers.

Twin Marquis is committed to ongoing new product research. Mok said that the company invests in the latest technology and newest machinery to maintain and improve efficiency. A mechanism for quality control is in place at every stage of product development to ensure the highest level of distinction.

The decision to convert the manufacturing facility to kosher was a matter of good business, said Mok. "Customers were asking if our products were kosher and I thought it would make our products more appealing to the mainstream market," she said. The Star K organization of Baltimore supervises the Brooklyn



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facility.

Mok says that she is not satisfied with the current status of kosher foods distributors. "I want to reach more kosher customers and I really need to find some good distributors to get our products out there."

Mike Decker, a partner with Vandeburg Farms in Whitney Point, NY (607/692-3665) faces many challenges in the day-to-day operations of his goat cheese manufacturing business. The most significant business challenge facing Decker is getting his goat cheese to store shelves at an economical price. According to Decker, he sells the product to his wholesalers for \$1.65 per package and it eventually ends up with a retail price of about \$4.00 for a four-ounce container. The farm is supervised by the OU and Decker believes that although his products are kosher and far superior to the non-kosher competition, the price difference should not be so drastic. "A consumer should not have to pay twice as much for goat cheese just because it's kosher," he said. "The situation is very frustrating."

Decker says that he cannot raise

the price to wholesalers because they say that they "can buy it cheaper from another source."

Decker's objective is to reach store shelves at a more affordable price.

"We need to reach a broad base of buyers to make it work," he added.

Over the past three years, business has steadily increased and Decker is optimistic about the future of Vandeburg.

With nearly 100 goats, the company produces 600 - 700 pounds of goat cheese weekly. Ron Vandeburg, Decker's partner, handles the milking end of the operation.

The three small businesses cited are just some of the business challenges facing kosher (and non-kosher) businesses across the board. Issues like friction between business owners and wholesalers, competitive pricing, manufacturing, space and raw materials necessitate companies to re-evaluate business strategies and to become more efficient and creative in their day to day operations. KOT

