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Why Is This Meal Different From all Other Passover Meals?

By Victoria Hurley-Schubert - 4/17/2006

LAKESWOOD - As families gather for Seders this week, many will be missing relatives who are far from home with the U.S. military. But Jewish soldiers stationed abroad will have the chance to celebrate Passover with matzo and macaroons, thanks to Euro-Cut, a Lakewood food company.

"I did not know how many thousands of Jews there are in the military requesting Passover meals," says Abe Halberstam, president of the food broker and distribution company. His firm's La Briute Meals product line makes Kosher for Passover Meals Ready-to-Eat (MREs). "I was shocked by the number."

Passover, which began April 13, is an eight-day religious celebration whose focus is the Seder, a meal that symbolizes the Jews' flight from slavery in Egypt.

Euro-cut isn't the only company feeding the U.S. military's observant Jews. A Chicago firm, My Own Meals (MOM), provides for the day-to-day dietary needs of this group. It was the supplier last year, when the military first purchased kosher for Passover meals. However, MOM chose not to compete for the contract for 2006.

As a result, this year's Passover spread is in the hands of Euro-Cut. The Department of Defense Logistics Agency ordered 777 cases of Passover meals for this year's holiday from the company, according to Jim LeCollier, the chief of individual assembly with the subsistence supplier operations directorate at the Defense Supply Center in Philadelphia. The 9,324 Passover meals cost \$93,240.

Halberstam says he contacted the military three years ago to interest the Department of Defense (DoD) in his products. He had to convince the government that the meals would meet soldiers' nutritional and caloric requirements. For Passover, he added snacks, such as dried fruit, macaroons and nuts, and matzo, since unleavened bread is an important part of the tradition. Soldiers have a choice of beef stew or chicken and potatoes.

According to the DoD the Passover meals cost \$147.83 per case. Regular kosher meals cost \$90.47 per case; nonkosher MREs costs \$86.98 per case. According to a DoD spokesperson, Euro-Cut's La Briute line met most of the technical requirements at a reasonable price.

Halberstam says his privately held business, founded in 1993, has annual revenue "in the millions." The company employs 10 people and has been growing at a rate of 25% for the past several years, he says, adding that he's hoping for 50% growth this calendar year.

The idea for La Briute dates back to 1999, when agencies were planning for the possibility of serious problems as the calendar switched over to the year 2000, he says. Because of concerns that many computer systems might fail, "We were hashing all different types of ideas, what to do if the power went out. Someone came up with the military meals."

That idea looked even better after 9/11. "There was a big problem with feeding the emergency people, especially kosher," Halberstam says. "We made the decision to go full-steam ahead and come up with a product."

La Briute Meals entered the market in 2002. Euro-Cut started out provisioning travelers to areas where kosher food was unavailable. It then found a place supplying emergency-management teams.

Now the company markets the products to the U.S. military, the Red Cross and various emergency-management offices nationwide, Halberstam says.

The meals are assembled and packaged at Euro-Cut's Lakewood facility, he says. Production of the components—such as the heating devices and individual food elements of the meals—is outsourced to another food manufacturer and the heater is made by TrueTech in Cincinnati, a company that manufactures the regular MRE heating elements. Halberstam holds a license from TrueTech for the

heating elements, which are less powerful than the military's, for his meals in the kosher market.

The La Briute line started out with three selections and now features 11 kosher MREs, with two made especially for Passover. Nine varieties include the self-heating devices. There are four varieties without a heater for the general market under the name "Sizzling Cuisine." According to Halberstam, preparation in a high-temperature pressure cooker sterilizes the products, which contain no preservatives. Sealed in plastic trays, they have a shelf life of two years.

The Labruite meals are available online for \$6.99 plus shipping. Local grocery stores, national chains such as Albertsons, Acme and ShopRite, and stores in Israel also carry the meals, Halberstam says.

"Every kosher-observant person" is a potential customer, Halberstam says. "We get e-mails from people traveling abroad to some remote city in the U.S. to ship meals to a hotel. These meals meet them there."

Last year, the DoD purchased 12,273 cases of regular kosher meals from My Own Meals, the company that "created the kosher ration program for the military in 1996 and [has] been supplying them ever since," according to its president and founder, Mary Anne Jackson.

Supplying the troops for Passover "was a big deal last year," Jackson says. Last year was the first time the military provided Passover MREs to the troops. "There was a lot of discussion. It was difficult getting them to Afghanistan; some were stolen."

Jackson started her company in 1986, creating all-natural meals for children. In December 1990, says Jackson, MOM and other firms were approached to supply kosher MREs for Desert Storm. "The producers of [regular] MREs were too busy making rations," she says.

By the end of that operation in January 1991, Jackson had drafted a proposal to provide a complete line of kosher meals to the military. In 1996 the military agencies agreed to permit the distribution of kosher MREs. Jackson won the bidding for that contract and has supplied them since.

Jews comprise 0.5% of service personnel, Jackson says, and MOM produces 70,000 meals in 10 varieties during a nonwar year. Her contract is on a per-case basis; the government pays \$83.48 apiece. Last year, she shipped 168,000 meals due to the ongoing war.

E-mail to victoriah@njbiz.com

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