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classifieds

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Illinois' J&M foods eager to cater to Gulf Muslims

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Mary Anna Jackson's small booth at the Middle East's largest arms show in the United Arab Emirates had the perfect recipe to cook a deal. Surrounded by military hardware of every calibre, Jackson's J&M Company was tempting visitors' appetite with an array of ready-to eat "halal" beef stew, chicken and noodles and other food products prepared to suit the dietary requirements of Muslims.

"This is a perfect market for us. All these people buying guns, tanks and bombs, they all need food for their soldiers," Jackson, J&M vice-president in charge of marketing, told Reuters. "We have five million Muslims in the United States. There are one billion Muslims around the world and many of them live in this part of the world."

Armed with years of experience in catering to thousands of Muslims serving in the armed forces of the United States, Canada and The Netherlands, 47-year-old Jackson said she had the perfect product to cater to the needs of around 200,000 servicemen in the Gulf armies.

The Deerfield, Illinois-based firm boasts an array of ready-to-eat field rations, prepared in accordance with Islamic law. Many army, navy and air force officers of various ranks and from all over the Middle East shopping for arms at the five-day International Defence Exhibition (IDEX) in Abu Dhabi took a moment from weapons inspections to sample the food.

Many came back for a second bite.

Jackson said she has travelled around in several Gulf Arab states trying to market her products and hopes to win her first contract soon. "We're hoping to close one (deal) very soon. We're working on it," she said. She declined to name the potential client.

Jackson said she had been modifying her products to suit Middle Eastern tastes. Instead of potatoes, she was introducing rice into the individual ration boxes which armies can distribute to conscripts. Jackson's new menu also includes Chicken Mediterranean, humus - a Middle Eastern side dish - and honey.

Most Middle Eastern dishes feature rice as part of the main course, often as a stuffing or a companion for meat and vegetables. Potatoes are normally used as a side dish. "We do a lot more with rice. One of my programmes has potatoes in it and I am switching that to rice. We've been going in that direction," Jackson said. "Chicken and black beans may be good for Texas or some place in the south, but not for this market."

Founded in 1986, J&M was launched as a company specialising in all-natural meals for children. The firm decided to expand its business on the eve of the 1991 Gulf war, when the United States invited firms already supplying its mainly Christian soldiers to provide religious meals to servicemen converging in Saudi Arabia to drive Iraqi troops out of Kuwait.

Months of work to develop a menu that suited Muslim requirements appeared on the verge of being wasted when the war ended before J&M was even able to serve one meal to the hundreds of thousands of servicemen assembled in the Saudi desert. "The war ended very quickly and they said, okay never mind and they walked away," Jackson said. "I said 'no no'. Just because the war has ended doesn't mean that the need is gone. Let's work on that."

Jackson said she developed an entire ration programme for the U.S. military over the



Jackson said she developed an entire ration programme for the U.S. military over the following two years, which proved a hit among soldiers. But she had another battle on her hands against the U.S. military, which wanted firms already providing it with rations for its troops to cater to Muslims. And she won. "They wanted to give it to some other companies that are protected in the U.S. so in the next few years, I fought just for the right to bid on the contract that I created," she said.

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