

HEADQUARTERS: DEERFIELD, ILL.
SPECIALTY: HALAL-CERTIFIED MEALS
MARY ANNE JACKSON, FOUNDER AND
PRESIDENT: "WE HAVE THE HIGHEST
LEVEL OF ISLAMIC SUPERVISION
CERTIFYING OUR PRODUCTION
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Certified Success

Illinois-based J & M Food Products Co. seeks to become a world leader in halal-certified meals, and currently provides its services to institutions around the world. **BY KATE BURROWS**

PIONEERING THE HALAL MOVEMENT IN AMERICA, J & M FOOD Products Co. ensures that every meal it produces meets the strict stipulations of Muslim dietary requirements that are compliant with the community's religious beliefs. During the past several years, the company has achieved substantial success in its production of Meals Ready to Eat [MREs] for both American soldiers and Iraqi soldiers training with American troops, says founder and President Mary Anne Jackson.

She emphasizes that by consuming J & M's high-quality halal-certified MREs, American and Iraqi soldiers will be more successful and efficient during training. The company plays an important role in the war effort, because "the U.S. government is training Iraq to take over for itself, and we will only be able to leave when the training is complete," she says. "Unlike American soldiers, Iraqi soldiers do not enlist for a fixed period of time and can quit at any time for any reason without repercussion. We're helping to get our troops home sooner, because if Iraqi soldiers are happy with their ratings, they'll stay in the

military and ultimately be more successful in their training."

The U.S. government agrees that the company's contributions are important as well, and the Department of the Army awarded Jackson with its highest medal granted to civilians, its Patriotic Civilian Service medal. The award was especially appreciated, Jackson says, after years of overcoming the challenges of a volatile market.

Jackson founded the company with the goal to prepare individual, all-natural meals for children ages two to 10 in plastic pouches with an extended shelf life. Then called My Own Meals Inc., the company soon found success and started to evolve into other segments.

"In 1991, we started revamping the company to produce religious meals, and started J & M as a division that would focus on halal meals for adults and children," Jackson says.

The company currently provides halal-certified, shelf-stable meals to institutions and governments worldwide, including prisons, nursing homes and grocery stores, Jackson says. The

halal segment is slowly gaining consumer awareness, and "is a burgeoning market, growing in its own way," she says.

True halal certification, however, is only recognized after many steps are taken to ensure the authenticity of the product. "All packaging and every ingredient must be certified or approved before we use that particular product," she says. "Each meal production and key ingredient facility has a procedure manual that outlines how the product can enter the facility and how it must be handled and packaged. With regard to equipment, everything must be sparkling clean to make sure there is no potential for contamination."

The *Halal Production Standards* manual, co-authored by Jackson, is sold to institutions and governments in 26 countries. Now available by e-mail, outlines the restrictions and procedures required to maintain the authenticity of halal certification. The manual also stresses the importance of working with reputable Islamic supervisory agencies, organizations that are responsible for overseeing the halal certification process, because the legitimacy as a manufacturer of halal-certified products depends on its ability to comply with specified regulations.

To further secure the authenticity of its products, Jackson says the company works closely with Truitt Brothers Inc., a contract packer with experience in shelf-stable meal packaging. Both companies work as a team to produce authentic halal-certified meals, and have strict policies set in place to ensure the quality of each product.

"We have the highest level of Islamic supervision reviewing our production to make sure everything is done properly,

through the Islamic Food and Nutrition Council of America [IFANCA]," Jackson adds. "We make sure that every ingredient we purchase is approved and signed-off by IFANCA and our on-site Islamic inspectors."

In addition to meeting strict certification standards, the company also must meet the nutritional guidelines for U.S. military combat rations.

"We have to make sure everything meets the U.S. Surgeon General's requirements for active soldier use," she explains. "This means we have to have every calorie accounted for, along with the perfect combination of fat and carbohydrates, and all vitamins and minerals."

"We have to gather detailed information from our suppliers and provide the government with documentation that ensures that we are meeting their nutritional requirements for active soldier use."

This becomes increasingly difficult, she adds, because as suppliers or ingredients change, the entire MRE is affected. "If a supplier stops making a product that we are buying, the whole ration must change," she says. "We're always juggling in some way."

The company is currently preparing for the possibility of diminishing military demand for its products, as the U.S. government begins turning over the procurement of rations to the Iraqi government, Jackson explains. J & M hopes to move further into the commercial market to make up for any potential losses, but she believes the company is on the front edge of the industry and is well positioned for success. ■

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certified, halal and
dhabiha halal meals,
rations and food
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