

LEADING THE WAY - J&M FOOD PRODUCTS - A PROFILE

By Nazish YarKhan



Did you know the US Army serves Halal rations and universities in the US have explored how they could offer students Halal meals? Paving the path towards these realities, is J & M Food Products, an IFANCA certified company.

Mary Anne Jackson, President, J & M Food Products, was already in the food business when she decided to expand into the Halal foods market in the early 1990's. She started making fully prepared, Halal ready-to-eat meals that were shelf-stable and in two versions of packaging. They continue to be available. The 8 oz foil pouches have a five-year shelf-life from date of manufacture while the 10 oz microwaveable / heatable-in-water individual plastic trays have a two-year shelf-life from date of manufacture. "We created the children's meals market starting in 1986. We look at niches and build on them. This is another niche," she says of her decision to produce Halal meals.

Why did Ms. Jackson choose IFANCA to get J & M Food Products certified especially when there are other Halal Certification Organizations?

"I'd met with various agencies including ICNA and the American Muslim Council. Dr. Chaudry was very committed that a proper Halal certification program be implemented. He was a natural choice," says Ms. Jackson.

How different is Kosher from Halal?

The only true similarities between Kosher and Halal lie in the fact that pork is not permitted under either religion, Ms. Jackson points out. "Until Muslim consumers learn that Halal and Kosher laws of slaughter actually differ, and are not similar enough to substitute each other, the Halal meat prepared-meals and raw meat markets will not grow much," she says. "Muslim consumers must actually demand and seek out properly certified Halal food products to the exclusion of others."

"Why would a Muslim believe that Kosher slaughter will meet the requirements of Halal?" she asks. "The problem here is that the Kosher suppliers and Kosher certifying agencies are making concentrated and successful efforts to promote and define "Kosher" as a "Halal substitute" and consumers fall for it. As a result, the Halal market's growth is limited by Muslim consumers themselves and by the competitor's strong and successful marketing. While the Kosher consumer market is declining for Jews, it is growing amongst Muslims and others who believe in the marketing tactics of Kosher suppliers."

5/2/2006

Further, "consumers pay a premium for the back half of the slaughtered animals, which the Kosher community considers non-Kosher. Since a ready Halal market exists, Kosher suppliers can maximize profit selling animal hind quarters as Halal or Halal substitute, depending upon the Halal certifying agency's interpretation of Halal."

As you know IFANCA does not endorse, accept or approve Kosher meat as Halal. What can it do to protect Halal territory?

"The demand for Kosher foods is driven by the Kosher certifying organizations and Kosher suppliers, not by the 10% of the 5 million Jews in the USA who keep Kosher. So, either consumers must aggressively demand certification, or certifying agencies must organize together to publicize the need and benefits of Halal certification to both non-Muslims and Muslims." She adds that IFANCA alone cannot make a dent in the problem. This is especially true when other major Halal certifiers put the Halal stamp of approval on Kosher meat and sometimes even non-Kosher meat.

How did J&M Food Products get into Halal Foods?

J & M Food Products' first big customer for Halal foods was the US Military even though less than half of one percent of the US military is Muslim. "During military meetings and discussions with Muslims and Jews (we learned that) the Military thought Kosher would be good enough. We convinced them (that) we had to keep them separate," says Ms. Jackson. That's what started the ball rolling.

Ms. Jackson, under the banner of J & M Food Products, created the first ever Halal military ration (MRE) and convinced the military to put it into the system. The military bid the contract for Halal rations out publicly and J & M Food Products has won it, as the sole supplier, every year since 1996.

"At first, these were vegetarian meals dual certified as Kosher and Halal but then as the demand grew, meat was added to the menu. Today, they have 12 varieties, including meals comprising lamb, beef, chicken and cheese. All the pouches for the military and limited other customers are labeled in Arabic and English." The company does supply to militaries of other nations too.

Where can we purchase J&M Food Products in the retail market?

"We do not sell raw Halal meat, only fully prepared, fully certified shelf-stable meals," says Ms. Jackson. "Right now, we only sell via internet, and through institutions, such as universities. We helped create a Halal meal program at Northwestern University. We sell through specialty stores. Most of our stores call in orders and we ship via UPS. "

Do you have any advice on how Muslims can effectively band together and demand more Halal meat in non-ethnic grocery stores?

"Yes. First, you need a watch dog group - some independent organization or magazine that watches for mislabeling. Without policing, it is worthless since anyone today can label something 'Halal' and usually get away with it. The Jews have "Kashrus" Magazine. It publishes the names of all the violators of labeling. You cannot stop there. You and the

Halal certifying organization's name on the package must pursue the violator and demand a recall for improper labeling. Use the state laws to help. Laws in certain states like Illinois help but only if the community does its monitoring. Next, these same magazines and others must educate Muslim consumers about what Halal is and is not and describe why one needs to choose Halal food. Finally, I, in collaboration with IFANCA, have written an easy-to-read book on this subject, for producers. Producers should follow a common standard. Anyone can request a free copy." 