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Vegetarian Journal 2004 Issue 2

“How Did They Think of That?”

The Journey of Vegetarian Foods from Idea to Store Shelves

By Keryl Cryer

Do you ever find yourself wondering how all those great vegetarian food items got into your local market? No, not who put them physically on the shelves or in the freezer cases, but who had the initial idea for that soysage? Or how did that company get those veggie burgers to look so much like their beef counterparts? How could someone create soy ice cream that tastes better than most dairy versions?

Each of these items started out as someone's idea, but whose? Who comes up with the recipes? How does a company decide to manufacture the result as a product? How do they know people will like it enough to buy it? These are just some of the questions that come up during a food item's journey from idea to ideal product.

Who Thinks of These Foods, Anyway?

The first step in creating any new food product is for someone to come up with a concept for an item. Since everyone eats, almost anyone could have a brainstorm about what they'd like to see at their next meal. Take Seth Tibbott, for example. The founder of Turtle Island Foods, which makes Tofurky™ products, was a teacher-naturalist who brought children into the field to educate them about ecology. His environmental background inspired him to become a vegetarian in 1970, and he was

always looking for good protein sources. He had read about grain tempehs in cookbooks, but he hadn't seen such products in the United States at the time. Seth began to experiment with making tempeh at home for his own consumption and developed three unique varieties—a soy tempeh, a five-grain tempeh, and tempehroni, which was similar to an herbed soy sausage. By 1980, Seth had perfected the recipes and introduced them as what he believes were the first grain tempehs in the American market.

Other ideas come from people who work specifically with food manufacturers. Craig Snow, who has been a vegan for 12 years, graduated from the University of Missouri with a degree in Food Science. He was developing vegetarian products for ConAgra, which makes Healthy Choice and Banquet items, when he came upon an opportunity at Worthington Foods. Craig became a Group Leader in the Product Development Division of the company, which was already distributing vegetarian products to mainstream supermarkets under the Morningstar Farms brand name. Kellogg's bought Worthington out in 1999, and Craig now heads a group that formulates ideas for both the Worthington and Morningstar Farms labels, as well as for the Loma Linda and Natural Touch product lines.

As part of a large corporation, Craig and his team often brainstorm ideas among themselves. Concepts also come from other areas, such as marketing, sales, research, and consumer information. Together, the departments look at food trends and what their competition is producing. For instance, Morningstar Farms' Homestyle Chili & Cornbread Pot Pies were meant as an appealing alternative to similar products containing meat, both because they are vegan and because they contain significantly less fat than traditional pot pies.

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Smaller operations usually don't have the luxury of such a large staff, but that doesn't mean they can't come up with something just as great. Matt Koch, the Founder and President of Road's End Organics, Inc., had graduated from Duke University in Computer Science and Economics when he created a dairy-free, cheese-like sauce for pizzas, calzones, and steamed vegetables he made at home. He still experiments and uses his own taste buds to see if a food item could have potential.

“Now, we approach the creation of new products mostly in-house by being creative at lunch time,” Matt said. “Although we do use a former Ben & Jerry’s food technologist for some of our product development and more technical questions, our new vegan, organic, gluten-free gravy mix was stumbled upon in the factory. Our production manager was attempting to make some gravy for a noodle and seitan meal, when we realized that we had many of the ingredients and all of the same manufacturing capabilities that it would take to make a gravy mix under the Road’s End label.”

The Production Process

When Road’s End decided to pursue their new gravy mixes, the staff began with a simple recipe, then worked to perfect it. “We quickly threw together a version with soy sauce, veggie broth, flour, nutritional yeast, garlic, salt, etc.,” Matt said, “and after tasting it, we knew we were on to something... but the product was still a long way off. The next step was replacing the soy sauce with a powdered version. After much searching we found an organic, gluten-free tamari powder for our mix that is delicious and ‘clean.’ We then tried many blends of yeast, herbs, and different flours, until we settled on ingredients that gave us the best flavor, color, and texture.”

A company like Morningstar Farms works in a similar fashion but on a much grander scale. First, they make a consumer concept statement, which describes the product’s features and lists the flavors and ingredients needed to create it. Then, Craig’s team physically makes the food in the product development labs on a small scale. If the item works, they will proceed to a miniature version of a real plant called a pilot plant to see that the item can be manufactured in a way that can duplicate the taste and texture within the cost parameters.

After all, every company wants to ensure that such food items will work well for them financially. Seth said, “I think a lot of people underestimate the margins we need to develop and market a product. I know I was unrealistic about marketing at the beginning of Turtle Island.” Before launching a product, he and his staff ask themselves, ‘What will it take to produce and market this product? Can we sell it for a reasonable price? Will it be worth it?’ If all of the answers are positive, the company takes its idea to the public.

They begin the consumer testing phase, when ordinary people taste the food and let the companies know what they think of it. For example, Kellogg’s will try to find a cross-section of possible “healthier consumers” from around the United States, buyers from both coasts, the South, and the Midwest. Though some are vegetarians, many are not. They are just people who happen “to be receptive to buying vegetarian food,” Craig said.

Likewise, Road's End gathers opinions about any new product before they introduce it to the market. "After coming up with recipes that we felt were tasty, healthy, and desirable, we did a few focus groups at a natural foods store and a gluten-free fundraising event," Matt said. "We received valuable feedback on taste, packaging, consumer demands, and more, and then felt comfortable moving forward with our launch."

So, a company has developed the formula for the product, decided if it's feasible to manufacture it with a budget and with their facilities, and analyzed consumer feedback. Before the manufacturer introduces the new product, it must "fill the pipeline," as Craig calls it. This means the company has to produce enough of the item that they can meet retailers' initial demands and keep their shelves well stocked once sales begin. By the time the product actually makes its debut at your local market, it has been anywhere from six months to possibly as long as three years since the idea for it was first knocked around a lunch room or a board room.

Some Advice from Those Who've Been There

There are a few paths that you can take if you're interested in creating vegetarian foods, either as a hobby or as a career. The first would be to study culinary arts or to earn a degree in an area related to the development of foods.

"A lot of people who work in food product development are food science majors," Craig said. They have often taken courses like traditional chemistry classes, food chemistry, food microbiology, food processing, food sanitation, sensory classes, and business classes. Upon graduation, they usually work in food manufacturing facilities or with food safety. The most sought-after candidates for such positions are often 'technical' chefs, individuals with both a food science degree and a culinary background.

That doesn't mean that someone with the inclination and the talent should drop everything and enroll at the nearest culinary institute. Seth and Matt are both proof that kitchen gourmets from any background can find success in this area. These entrepreneurs did have some words of wisdom for those who are interested in following in their footsteps.

"My advice, from past products that did not come out as smoothly as our Chreese powder or gravy mixes," Matt said, "is to thoroughly test and feel comfortable and confident with a product before presenting it to major distributors or retailers. We have promised products that we then rushed to market, and they did not perform for us once on the shelves. I also strongly recommend focus groups and surveys. It is one

thing to think people will like what you are bringing to market.... It's another thing to ask them before you bring it to market."

Also, it's important to keep in mind that the natural products market is tight right now. It's hard to break in with so many other products on the shelves. "You can't just knock on the door," Seth said. "You have to beat on it, then block it with your foot when it opens."

He noted that this is one of many reasons why new products fail, a truth about items from large companies as well as small ones. The competition is often fierce. However, it's especially important for owners of small companies to invest their efforts into products that have a good chance to succeed. They simply do not have the financial resources to create and market items that won't perform well.

"Eventually, if a product is good, people may try it and incorporate it into their lives," Seth said. "There are undiscovered niches out there, and it's exciting to find them."

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