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A rough road to get to market

The supermarket, with all its variety, is a great place to buy food. But if you're a small producer trying to get product on the shelves of the big chains, it often can be a long, frustrating experience.

Matt McKinney, Star Tribune

A food company isn't really a big deal until its products are in the supermarket. But how does that happen? It's one thing if you're General Mills, but something else if you're starting out in your own kitchen.

The good news is that shoppers today are more adventurous and supermarket shelves are more diverse than ever. The bad news is there's also a lot more competition among small food producers to get their lines on those shelves.

"You've got to have a product that's got a very high chance of selling in order to get into a supermarket today," said Bill Greer of the Food Marketing Institute in Washington.

Steve Sorensen has the enviable job of selecting which foods to bring to market at Lund Food Holdings Inc. He sees 10 to 15 new products each month, some from people who have little more than a family recipe. He says 1 in 10 get in the store, and specialty products make up less than 10 percent of the store's total sales volume.

The median number of products in any supermarket today is 45,000.

Here's the story of four of them.

Angie's Kettle Corn

If you've ever found yourself hankering for popcorn on the way to a Vikings game, chances are you've tasted Angie's Kettle Corn, sold on the Metrodome plaza.

Dan and Angie Bastian got their start in 2001 selling popcorn -- kettle corn, known for its sweet and salty flavor -- at fairs.

The company was based in the Bastians' home in Mankato, close to the Vikings training camp. The Bastians gave away bags of kettle corn to coaches and players, eventually landing a deal as a Vikings corporate sponsor.

That was fine, but the couple saw nothing like their product at local grocery stores.

The story of how they got their product into supermarkets included a chance encounter with a food consultant at their daughter's Girl Scouts meeting. That led to a meeting with Byerly's.

They named the popcorn after noticing that most brands had a male identity -- think Orville. When Lund Food Holdings Inc. began carrying Angie's Kettle Corn it was, for Angie, "like we had arrived."

Today they sell at 50 stores in the metro area and Mankato, including Kowalski's, Lunds, Byerly's and many co-ops. They say that supermarket sales are now 80 percent of their revenue.

Kitchen Dancer soups

"Ever since college we wanted to have a business," said Maggie Mortensen, the self-described chief cook and bottle washer at North Aire Market, the company behind Kitchen Dancer soups. (Her partner, Mary Dodds, goes by No. 1 juggler.)

They started by testing their soups with a tough crowd: Mortensen's mother.

"We would make batches of soup and put them in ice cream pails," Mortensen said. "I would call Mom and say, 'Get your lady friends and come down to the common room.' And all of these women, who were good cooks, would come down and say, 'This is too thin,' or, 'I don't like the color,' or whatever."

A food scientist converted their best recipe to a dry formula. They focused on creamy wild rice, tomato and cheddar cheese flavors.

Mentors at the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade coached them about the workings of the food industry. The group even had an awards program -- and North Aire Market won.

The coverage of their company in the trade press meant more buzz for Kitchen Dancer. They now sell the soups at Lunds, Byerly's and 1,000 stores nationwide.

Frostop Root Beer

The once-famous chain of Frostop Root Beer drive-ins catered to a generation of teens in the 1950s, growing from a single location in Ohio in 1926 to thousands nationwide by 1958.

Frostop drive-ins in Minnesota during the company's heyday included one at 50th and France in Minneapolis, where Pearson's Edina Restaurant sits today.

But habits changed, and the company eventually folded.

Enter Daniel Meyer.

The Hopkins businessman was looking for a root beer to sell to wholesale customers when he found one of the original flavor suppliers to the Frostop company.

"So we made a deal with them where they make the flavor and we acquired the recipe," Meyer said. "It took almost two years to duplicate it." He began selling it in the Twin Cities three years ago.

Meyer went to larger supermarket chains first, but he was too small to draw much notice. However, the smaller local chains were willing to hear him out.

Today the company sells Frostop not in drive-ins but at Lunds, Byerly's, Kowalski's and independently franchised Cub Foods stores.

Mumtaz basmati rice

Charlie Lee was a drug enforcement agent in Pakistan and Afghanistan before retirement brought him home to Hudson, Wis. While living in Asia, he developed a deep appreciation for rice.

"I was kind of an Uncle Ben's guy when I went to Asia," Lee said. "There, it's a staple and they eat it three times a day."

He started importing basmati rice, a type indigenous to India and Pakistan, in 1999 with a partner under the Mumtaz brand name. The first shipment -- a 20-foot container weighing 28 tons -- was purchased by Somali businessmen in the Twin Cities, who were supplying local ethnic markets.

It took two years of knocking on doors before Lee found someone in the Twin Cities who was interested in his rice business, Halee International.

His big break came when Kowalski's agreed to sell his rice at its Woodbury store. Today he's in 500 stores, including all of the Cub outlets in Minnesota.

His advice to others is perseverance. But be forewarned: If you try to sell food to a grocery store, consider this from the former Drug Enforcement Agency agent.

"The business I was in over there, it was very dicey. I find this just as challenging."

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