

# Creating a safe mix

## Meeting consumer allergy concerns

BY BEV BENNETT

About 12 million Americans live with food allergies. That's less than five percent of the U.S. population. So you may be asking why you'd want to develop food products for such a limited market.

Perhaps you're underestimating the power of this audience, says Anne Muñoz-Furlong, founder and chief executive officer of the Food Allergy & Anaphylaxis Network (FAAN), Fairfax, Va.

"The impact is three to four times that amount," says Muñoz-Furlong, whose organization is a source for food allergy information.

The ripple effect increases the potential audience for companies that want to invest the time in creating safe food products. Parents who buy school snacks for their children's classes take food allergies into account, as do friends and relatives of those with food allergies.

In addition, consumers who find allergen-safe foods are consistent customers, willing to pay higher prices, and even shop by mail order to get their favorite brands, says the allergy spokesperson.

No wonder some companies are catering to this group. They know that by offering specially formulated foods or providing food safety messages they can win the appreciation and attention of the food allergy community, often with little more than word-of-mouth recommendations.

Cherrybrook Kitchen Inc. is filling a niche by offering baking mixes for



Cherrybrook Kitchen fills a niche by offering baking mixes for people with food allergies.

people with food allergies. Patsy Rosenberg and her husband Chip started the company when Patsy was diagnosed with adult-onset allergies to eggs and dairy ingredients.

"It was impossible to eat desserts, so Patsy developed a mix that was safe," says Ashley Bistran, a spokesperson for the company, based in Burlington, Mass.

The company, which has been in business a little more than two years, spread the word of its non-allergenic baking line through trade shows, such as Expo West and Expo East and gourmet food shows.

Response has been very positive, according to Bistran. The mixes are in 3,500 stores around the country. Cherrybrook Kitchen has 12 products in its current line and is adding three new items this summer.

"Once you put the product on the market you have a very loyal following," says Bistran. "We do everything from consumer to trade events and get very involved with support groups such as FAAN. The support members talk and blog [about the products] online."

Unlike newcomer Cherrybrook Kitchen, Ener-G Foods Inc. has a long history — more than 40 years — of supplying foods to people with dietary restrictions. Now the company is tweaking its offerings to meet more allergy concerns.

Ener-G Foods, which manufactures dairy-free, wheat-free, gluten-free and peanut-free ready-made foods and mixes, recently added tree nuts to its list of exclusions.

"We used to have a snack bar with nuts. With the bad walnut harvest last year we decided to go nut free on January 1," says Jerry Colburn, national sales manager for Ener-G Foods, Seattle.

The company is introducing two new snack bars: One is brown rice and chocolate chip. The other is honey-flavored.

Although Applegate Farms, which makes natural and organic meat items, doesn't position itself as a company catering to consumers with food allergies, it has that audience.

"People with allergies or dietary restrictions have aligned with the natural and organic food movement," says Steve McDonnell, founder and chief executive of

Applegate Farms in Bridgewater, N.J.

“They identify with the organic movement as the place to go for producers who are conscientious about what they’re putting into food,” says McDonnell. Right now, the company’s new organic hot dog is garnering a lot of attention, he says. Three new pork sausages and two sliced hams — Virginia and

honey-based — are hitting the shelves as well.

One of the company’s current strengths is the educational effort. Knowing the attention people with allergies pay to what’s on food labels, Applegate Farms provides educational pieces on food

additives, allergies and other concerns.

“Doctors ask for them for their offices,” McDonnell says. “The real focus has to center around people becoming conscious of what they put in their bodies and how it affects their immune systems.” ■

## Allergen labeling

**T**he Food Allergen Labeling and Consumer Protection Act, which went into effect in January 2006, provides an option for voluntary information about accidental trace allergens.

Packages may include phrases such as “may contain traces of” or “manufactured on shared equipment with.”

These voluntary phrases, which are included in many food products, have drawbacks for consumers dealing with food allergies, says Anne Muñoz-Furlong.

“It’s putting the consumer at risk for having no food choices or playing Russian roulette if they ignore the “may contain” statement,” Muñoz-Furlong says.

Her advice to companies is to use the voluntary phrase only if there’s a risk that can’t be eliminated. Although companies may use the language as liability protection, that might not be the best approach, according to Muñoz-Furlong. “The irony is that companies that embrace food allergy [protection] and do everything they can to make labels that are truthful and trustworthy have loyalty that no advertising could gain. Good labeling is a positive.”

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