

Fresh Meals filling a national niche

By CARRIE DILLARD, Union Co. Advocate editor
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MORGANFIELD -- Today, their meals can be found on the shelves of nearly 800 Wal-Mart stores across the U.S.

But come October, Uniontown-produced Fresh Meals will be in 2,500 Wal-Mart Supercenters in nearly every state of the nation except Hawaii.

Fresh Meal Solutions Inc. is the newest concept of co-owners Jim and Linda Baird of Jim David Meats.

It began in July 2006 after the two purchased packing technology from France to produce fresh, never-frozen microwavable meals that are not only perfectly portioned, but taste good, too.

That's the backbone that Linda Baird says makes Fresh Meals an individual in the marketplace.

It stays in your refrigerator, not freezer, and has a shelf life of 45 days. "No one else has anything like it on the market right now," she stated.

"Others last only seven to 10 days. And when you're shipping all across the U.S., and it takes four days to get from here to California, the grocer only has three to six days to sell it."

With Fresh Meals, the grocer and customer reap the benefits of 40 additional days of shelf life.

The meals have many applications. "They are wonderful for older people. If you are worried about them eating well, you know they won't burn themselves (cooking)," she explained. "They're not diet food but they are nutritious."

Recipes used for the meals are home-styled, and many are Linda's own, including new meatloaf and pulled-pork dinners. "The recipes are made like you'd make it at home," she said.

But how to translate those made-at-home recipes into mass-produced meals in the plant, and make them taste the same? Daily quality control and taste-testing.

Linda says their food is the "real deal," using real mozzarella cheese, pasta from Italy, and chemical-free chicken and ham from their partner plants Little Kentucky Smokehouse and Jim David Meats. All ingredients used to make the meals are preservative-free.

There is a synergy between the three plants. From sharing energy costs to purchasing raw product, they help each other out, Jim Baird said. And when one plant grows, so does the other.

In the past month they've hired 30 new employees across all three plants, because come October, Fresh Meals alone is more than tripling product production and shipping.

"It takes everyone here to do what we have to do," Linda Baird stated. "It's because of these people we are able to do what we do."

They currently employ about 150 workers. "We have a lot of husband and wife teams, and daughters," she continued.

The expanding sales to Wal-Mart will mean production will triple, from 35,000 to 40,000 meals per week to more than 120,000 meals.

Every bit of their success, Linda Baird said, is attributed to "a deep deep faith in God."

"This company is us. We are not a huge corporation. We're individuals," she said. "To walk into a Wal-Mart in Nevada and see our product ... it's mind boggling."

"I just ask, 'God, how did you do this?' He has guided us every step of the way."

In two weeks, Fresh Meal Solutions will ship out 12 semi-truck loads of meals to prepare for the increased Wal-Mart distribution.

But not only will production numbers increase, so will the number of meal varieties available to consumers.

Fresh Meal Solutions currently produces 10 different meals, but starting in October, it will add six more, including meatloaf with peas and corn, chicken fajitas with Spanish rice, pulled pork with baked beans, chicken enchiladas, chicken Florentine with bowtie pasta, and shrimp scampi.

They will continue door-to-door deliveries to Wal-Mart stores in this area, including Morganfield and Henderson.

Fresh Meals can also be found in 200 Kroger stores in the central U.S.