

THE CORNER SHOP



HEALTHY GROWTH



With Its Specialty Products, East Hartford Bakery Thriving

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The Hartford Courant February 25, 2009 East Hartford, CT

When the price of milk and wheat soared last spring because of rising fuel costs, Michael Smulders, founder of Bakery on Main, barely noticed.

The commercial bakery, which makes wheat-free, dairy-free and gluten-free organic granolas and snacks, was not affected by those price increases.

But he did feel the bite when "nuts went wild," Smulders said. Transportation costs soared, and "walnuts went through the roof. They doubled in price, from \$2.50 a pound to \$5. The price of canola oil also doubled, from 70 cents a pound to \$1.40 a pound. It's only just now going back to where it was at, at 70 cents a pound."

Bakery on Main raised its prices, but the increases did not affect sales of its products, which are formulated for people with certain food allergies, Smulders said.

"Food businesses are traditionally recession-resistant, and people who have special diets still need to buy their foods," said Smulders, 45.

The privately held company, which employs 50, would not release financial information, but Smulders described it as profitable and "growing rapidly."

In a brick bakery filled with the nutty sweet aroma of freshly made granola, the company produces more than 25 gluten-free, dairy-free or wheat-free products. Five days a week, starting at 4 a.m., workers mix, bake and package 10,000-pound batches of granola and snacks.

At the end of the day, it ships the items to grocery stores such as Whole Foods, Stop & Shop, Big Y and 1,400 other health food stores from California to England, Smulders said.

The company's gluten-free snacks, made with corn and rice, are popular with consumers with celiac disease. The estimated 2 million Americans with the disorder are allergic to gluten, a protein found in wheat, rye and barley. Although the bakery produces thousands of snacks each day, the company's test kitchens are its two small retail stores. Smulders opened the Garden of Light Natural Foods Market on Glastonbury's Main Street in 1992. The organic, vegetarian grocery store and bakery was financed by Smulders' personal savings. "I really wanted to be in a business I believed in," said Smulders, who has been a vegetarian for 20 years.

In 2000, Smulders opened a second Garden of Light grocery store in Avon.

His customers proved to be his best food critics. Smulders sent them home with sample creations from the bakery and asked them what they thought. The response was often positive, but many customers wanted a larger selection of allergen-free products, especially gluten-free products, he said.

"At the time, we were seeing a big increase in people suffering from allergies, especially celiac disease. The choice of foods for this group was limited," Smulders said. "We saw a need for more snacks and snack-type items." So he and his staff started experimenting in the kitchen.

"That tied in with my mission of making foods that are good for you but taste like they aren't," he said.

By 2004, as the demand for his specialty products grew, Smulders rented a small commercial bakery in Glastonbury. Two years later, in 2006, United Natural Foods in Killingly struck a deal to distribute Bakery on Main brand gluten-free and wheat-free products nationally. Two years ago, as Bakery on Main expanded its products and distribution, it moved to a 26,000-square-foot facility at 375 Park Ave. in East Hartford.

"We're a young company, and we're still growing," Smulders said. No matter what the economic climate, "people still want good food."

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