

# Brooks Food Group, Appetite for growth

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**Close customer focus is at the core of Brooks Food Group's remarkable success, as Laura Bonich tells Bernie Sheehan**

Keeping up with fast-changing food service trends is a constant challenge for producers. The latest research, for example, shows that Asian dishes are now outselling Italian items within casual dining chains, while well-travelled, media-savvy baby boomers are increasingly seeking authentic, upmarket ingredients.

An indicator of Brooks Food Group's success in meeting the changing needs of America's top quick-service and casual restaurant chains is that an astonishing 40 percent of its customers and products have been added in recent years. The company manufactures a range of custom-designed, frozen food including protein (mainly chicken) products, breaded vegetables such as onion rings, fruit sweet snacks, cheese products, and French toasts. "Nearly all our production goes to major food service chains, but we also have a small amount of school lunch and brokerage business," says Laura Bonich, manager of business development.



The company started out in 1995, when the Brooks family acquired Golden West Foods, a manufacturer of appetizers, cheese sticks, beef, vegetable, and bread products at Bedford, VA. Seeing the facility's potential, the family invested heavily in its production capability and improved its customer focus. Three years later, the family opened a second plant opened in Monroe, NC, allowing it to further expand into the chicken product market. In 10 years, Brooks Food's annual sales have risen from \$23 million to \$95 million, and the number of employees has risen to 400.

Today Brooks Food Group's Bedford facility contains the corporate headquarters, R&D facilities, pilot production plant, and a test kitchen. Both the Bedford and Monroe sites have the same manufacturing capabilities, allowing full production flexibility, and are regularly inspected by the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA), as well as by third parties on behalf of customers. "We consistently receive excellent ratings in our audits," says Bonich. "We have a vendor certification and audit program for our suppliers to ensure they are producing to our own or our customers' specifications. We have folks on the road all the time checking quality."

Brooks Food Group is constantly looking for process improvements, cost reduction opportunities and efficiency gains to stay on top in a highly competitive industry. "We're pretty lean on our staffing lines. We add staff according to the specific requirements of the customer," explains Bonich. "Some request a certain number of people on the line, for example, others may have hand-packing requirements at the bagging end. We introduced new bagging and casing equipment last year, and restructuring of that area and the new equipment has led to a 40 percent increase in throughput of our high-speed Formax (formed) products." Brooks is currently finalizing manufacturing technology that is completely new to the food industry, trying it out with selected customers to see if they can work with it.

This close customer focus is part of Brooks' strategy to be a value-added supplier of food solutions. It undertakes extensive research to identify products that are most suitable for a particular category of a customer and then produces prototypes in its test kitchen. "Sometimes a customer will come to us and say, 'We want a spicy chicken product' and we'll produce it for them," says Bonich, "but we also develop our own products and go to the customer with it and say, 'look at the trends, this product fits into the menu gaps you