

Brooks Food Group, Quality conscious

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Bedford, VA-based Brooks Food Group has managed to evolve with the ever-changing needs of America's top quick-service and casual restaurant chains. Peter Yezukevich looks into the story behind this young company with lofty goals



The proof of Brooks Food Group's evolution lies in the fact that 40 percent of its customers and products have been added in just the past few years. The company manufactures a range of custom-designed, frozen food including chicken, breaded vegetables such as onion rings, fruit sweet snacks, cheese products, and French toast. "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 idea of Brooks Food Group began with McCormick Foods in 1969. McCormick acquired a food manufacturing operation in Bedford, VA, and operated another manufacturing plant in Gilroy, CA, called Golden West Foods. The production of these two facilities was merged in an expanded Bedford plant and operated as Golden West Foods. Golden West Foods produced poultry, beef, vegetable, and bread products. In 1995, Frank and Robin Brooks purchased the operation and Brooks Food Group was created.

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 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.

"Brooks is in the process of establishing our three year strategy to achieve sales of \$200 million. We are evaluating our organizational readiness in our technical, manufacturing, and marketing disciplines and will be using our professional development programs and diversity to take our company to the next level," says Bonich.

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.

Time to market of new products depends both on the customer and the nature of the food. "We responded to one customer last year who requested a bench sample of an onion product and it was introduced to the market in 90 days," says Bonich. While other customers may require extensive testing with consumers and marketing and positioning of the product first, it's an example of how fast Brooks can jump into action if required.

Brooks Food Group is one of America's few minority-owned foodservice companies headed by a woman. Robin Brooks was recognized as Entrepreneur of the Year by the highly respected Women's Foodservice Forum in 2003. Brooks Food Group is a strong supporter of the Women's Foodservice Forum with several active members. Brooks Food Group is also a participant in the National Minority Supplier Development Council (NMSDC), and the Research Chefs Association (RCA), and is ranked in the Black Enterprise 100.

With almost 400 employees, an expert research and product development staff, a veteran sales team, and a dedicated customer service organization, the company plans to continue to grow and evolve with consumer needs.