

Allegro Fine Foods: Exporting Good Taste

By Dawn Bruno

Paris, France, may be the gourmet capital of the world, but Paris, TN, is making its own mark on international food and flavor. Allegro Fine Foods of Paris was founded in 1978 by Betsy and Dave Wilcox, who saw a market for their homemade marinades.

The Wilcoxes developed their first recipe in 1955, when they were looking for an inexpensive and easy way to spice up their meals. It wasn't long before it became popular in Paris. Almost 50 years later, Allegro Fine Foods proudly distributes its marinades throughout the United States and has expanded to international markets. Its products are kosher certified and available in original, hot-and-spicy, teriyaki and hickory smoke flavors.

Allegro has employed creative strategies to make exporting easier. And they're not just doing it for themselves. "Exporting is good for our community," says Allegro's international marketing director Rick Horiuchi, who recognizes that more sales mean more jobs for Paris, a rural town with a population of fewer than 10,000 people. This community focus has allowed Allegro to expand internationally while maintaining a small-town approach to building personal relationships and trust among clients and distributors.

Allegro attributes its aggressive international expansion in part to its dedication to using the resources available to small businesses. As a small business, Allegro has had to work harder than larger companies to enter the global market-



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place. It has taken advantage of services and information offered by the U.S. Dept. of Commerce's Commercial Service, the Tennessee Dept. of Agriculture, FAS and SUSTA (the Southern United States Trade Association) to expand its business to Hong Kong, Singapore and Japan, and has started pursuing the Mexican and Canadian markets.

From Paris to Mexico and Beyond

Through the MAP (Market Access Program), administered by FAS, SUSTA

has assisted Allegro in penetrating the Mexican market. During the past three years, the company has targeted Mexican supermarkets to distribute its products. Allegro's main supermarket chain customer is HEB/Mexico, with 20 stores in northern Mexico. The company also distributes products to Super Gigante in Monterrey, Mexico, and is looking to expand into southern Mexico. The FAS Agricultural Trade Office in Monterrey sponsored the perfect MAP activity, allowing companies like Allegro a chance

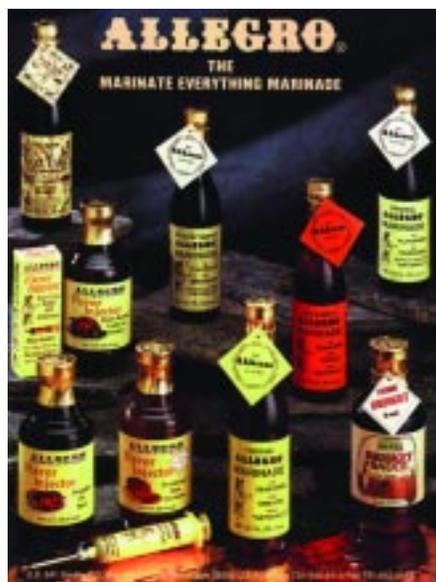
to gain exposure in the Mexican market through a private label promotion with HEB.

Allegro has translated its labels into Spanish and implemented direct mailings and promotional campaigns. “The MAP has been very beneficial to Allegro, and I would recommend this for other small companies,” says Horiuchi.

“Allegro exemplifies the best kind of company,” says Paul Nordstrom of the Tennessee Dept. of Agriculture. “It has a high-quality product that anybody can relate to and use with ease. They’ve always understood that an investment is necessary—of time, of participation, of product—to get results. We’re proud to claim Allegro as a true Tennessee product.”

While FAS is the government organization primarily responsible for assisting U.S. food and agricultural product exporters, the Commercial Service can provide assistance to food companies through its district offices across the United States. In addition to placing these companies in contact with FAS foreign offices or the appropriate state-regional trade association such as SUSTA, the district offices may offer advice on exporting and information on promotional activities sponsored by FAS and other organizations.

Since 2000, Allegro has also worked closely with the Memphis USEAC (U.S. Export Assistance Center), one of the Commercial Service’s offices. The Memphis USEAC provides market information, suggests trade events and promotes products, usually charging small fees for its services. At some events, like the North American Free Trade Agreement Conference in October 2002, Horiuchi has served as a panel speaker and met key Canadian and Mexican gov-



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ernment representatives. The event was held at the University of Tennessee in Martin, part of the rural community that includes Paris.

Spicing Up Exporting Opportunities

Allegro is looking into exporting opportunities in Australia, New Zealand and various European countries. Horiuchi’s advice for other small or rural businesses includes focusing on exporting and consistently attending foreign trade shows. He also recommends that companies take part in the MAP, advice echoed by Nordstrom.

“I would encourage any company that is already exporting or even thinking about exporting to investigate the MAP,” Nordstrom says. “The program can open doors that companies never could by themselves, and gives a company a chance to really think out, plan and execute its export strategy. In these tight markets, companies need to use every edge they can to succeed, and I believe the MAP gives many companies that edge.”

Horiuchi warns companies that they must be committed and focused if they are to be successful exporters. He stresses the need for patience, diligence and trust. “It is necessary for companies to have at least one or more persons dedicated to international business and marketing,” says Horiuchi. “Plus, there must be an upper management commitment to international business.”

Such efforts have enabled a small company to export marinade based on a family recipe to several countries, success that can be replicated by other firms. “With the rapid diffusion of technology, aggressive marketing strategies and programs such as the MAP, it is now possible for small businesses to reach the other side of the world in a way that they could not before,” Horiuchi concludes. ■

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