



An Exotic Experience Made Easy

By Tom Fielding

In my single days, I had only had one exotic (if you could call it that) recipe in my repertoire to impress a young lady who came over to my house for dinner. That legendary dish was Tom's Famous Broccoli Quiche (hey, it was the early 80s, and I was showing my compassionate self while being a real man), and it often time provided the overture to a very romantic evening.

However, had A.M.S. Exotics and its line of Earth Exotic Premium Vegetables been around in those formative dating years, I believe I would have made Casanova look like a monk. With a sizzling, barbecued steak, I could have served up a nice side of French Haricots Vert or a summer squash medley that would have dazzled even my most persnickety dates (of which there were unfortunately more than

a few).

Besides the great taste, the best part is the convenience of these products. I could have thrown those French green beans, squash or 17 other of the Earth Exotic premium vegetables into the microwave (in the bag for added convenience), and soon afterward I would have had a most successful date plate.

Alas, A.M.S. Exotic, Los Angeles, a part of the AMS network that includes offices in Western Europe and South Africa, started making inroads into U.S. retail only a couple of years ago. According to Managing Partner Scott Lehmann, in October 2004 the company developed the fresh line of Earth Exotics premium vegetables, and he said, "It has been like a baby in that it has been so fun watching the line grow and develop."

The biggest challenge the company faced at the beginning "was that it was obviously a brand nobody had heard of before. We created a line of products that we felt the retailer needed. Even though you could call it specialty produce, we took the product out of specialty and made it mainstream. Acceptance of A.M.S. Exotics new line has been very positive since its inception," he added. "We have been fortunate in that we had some great retail partners at the very start, and those relationships have stayed strong. The line first launched as a test with several supermarkets around the U.S., and then quickly caught on."

Lehmann said everything from the processing of the product to the packaging to the taste has been in constant development for its 19-product line. "We wanted to be at the forefront of food safety," he said. "Our product goes through a triple wash and tunnel dryer, so the vegetables are fully washed and dried. The product is also hand packaged, because some of the items, especially the squash, are very delicate."

The technology of the bag, Lehmann said, is also unique. "We utilize a micro-perforated package that allows the product to guarantee the greatest possible shelf life; the bags are manufactured in France specific to our product. A.M.S. Exotic now ships this product line all over the U.S. including the Southern California market."

He said getting retailers around the nation to see that the product is a niche that can be developed, and showing that the packaging can eliminate a great deal of shrink has been key to the success of the line. "Almost all the products have a 14-day shelf life and we only produce to order, so it is the freshest it can be when it hits the retailer -- usually with 24 hours."

Convenience for the consumer has been another strong factor in its acceptance. Along with being microwavable, the products can also be steamed and boiled in the bag.

The top selling product of the Earth Exotic Premium Vegetable line is the Earth Exotic's French Beans. However, Lehmann said some of the statistics are interesting. "In Virginia, for instance, red beets and okra are the big sellers, while French Beans lag behind. It's interesting to see the big sellers from a geographic point of view, and I think it shows we have a great opportunity for growth when we look at some of the numbers."

Just this line would have been enough to make me happy back in my bachelor days, but A.M.S. Exotics have also come out with an in-

novative line of cooked vegetable products. "We believe that consumers are always looking for the next evolution in cooking," Lehmann said, "and we believe our New Earth Exotics Cooked Vegetables are the unique product they are looking for."

He said the unique cooking process the company uses (they steam instead of pasteurizing) locks in the flavor and nutrients of its product. "Pasteurization methods call for quick cooking at high temperatures that kill bacteria, but it also kills the flavor. Our steaming process calls for the product to be cooked for a longer time at a lower temperature. Instead of killing flavor and nutrients, it eliminates only the bacteria, leaving the product with an abundance of flavor, texture and nutrients"

This 10-item product line is produced in France, but there is no problem when it comes to shelf life. That's because the items have a shelf life of approximately six months, which is great for people like me who forget they have a carton of milk in the back of the refrigerator until it looks like anti-freeze.

To prove the tastiness of the products, Lehmann handed me a plate of diced red beets. Being the sometimes gentleman that I am, I didn't tell Lehmann that beets are pretty far down my food pecking order. Surprisingly, they were so good that I took home a sample to my wife (who loves beets), put them in a salad, and it was so good that we are now a two-beet family.

Some of the other Earth Exotics Cooked Vegetables (that do need to be refrigerated) are sliced carrots, green kidney beans, sweet corn, lentils (which my next door neighbor confirmed are delicious), and red and white kidney beans.

With these two lines of products, A.M.S. Exotics, according to Lehman, is helping retailers realize that there is a huge section of their business they have never seen before. "Retailers are taking a hard look to be able to see beyond today's business into the future. We believe our products are the logical next step in the evolution of value added produce."

The company is also gaining many food-service clients, and Lehman said the loading flexibility it provides gives A.M.S. Exotics a good inroad into that business.

As for me, thanks to food and produce companies like A.M.S. Exotics, I can now have a nice dinner ready for my wife with so little hassle that I can download music, check sports scores and Google countless useless websites until only a few minutes before she gets home. I love technology!