

Bags allow AMS Exotic to expand line into retail

By DAVID MITCHELL
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Improved packaging has opened new markets for AMS Exotic LLC's Earth Exotics premium vegetables.

Director of sales and marketing Scott Lehmann said Los Angeles-based AMS had sold cut, washed items — such as asparagus tips — in 2-pound bags in the past but that the line was limited to foodservice customers in the western U.S. because of a seven- to eight-day shelf life.

Microperforated, 8-ounce bags from French manufacturer Franco Suisse have allowed AMS to move the vegetable line into retail stores and expand into the Midwest.

"The bag has made a tremendous difference in our ability to move to the product across the country," said Lehmann, who said the bags have extended shelf life to 14 days.

Lehmann said the bags have an anti-fog treatment and that the consumer can microwave, boil or steam the product in the bags, which have more than 200 tiny holes.

"Most breathable bags you can see the holes or they have a breathe strip," he said. "This bag actually has holes over the entire surface area, but you can't see them. If you squeeze it in your hand, you can feel the



■ Earth Exotic asparagus tips

air dissipate but you can't see the holes."

AMS test-marketed the retail product for more than a year before redesigning the bags in May. The line has been expanded to 19 stock-keeping units, and Lehmann said he expects his company to sell 500,000 cases in 24 retail chains this year. He also said he expects the company to sell more than 1 million cases in 2007.

AMS announced Aug. 29 that it had reached a distribution agreement with Chicago-based Midwest Institutional Foods. Midwest co-owner John Fitzgerald said the company was distributing the bagged vegetables to 12 retail chains in Illinois and Indiana and hoped to expand into Wisconsin and Michigan, where the company has other business.

"We were essentially a foodservice company," Fitzgerald said. "In the last year we've gotten into the retail end of it. Having these items has been a big boost for us."

Fitzgerald said the products have a suggested retail price of \$2.99.

Lehmann said that while Midwest Institutional Foods is distributing the line in the Midwest, AMS is looking for distributors in other parts of the U.S. and Canada.