



FAMILY BUSINESS

newsletter

Higher Taste

Elevating Food and Family

Rhonda and Hans Wrobel wanted to build a food business that was good for the customer and good for the planet — but it also needed to be good for their family. It was their consideration for family that placed their wholesale food company on its current trajectory and made Higher Taste what it is today.

Before Hans and Rhonda began selling their grab-and-go vegetarian and vegan fare to stores, they ran a catering company. Rhonda, a health store worker, and Hans, a banquet chef, had moved to Oregon from the East Coast in 1986 seeking a market to make and sell the vegetarian food that had become important to them. Catering weddings and large events in the Portland area, they created dishes that were a hit among vegetarians and non-vegetarians alike and business was going well. But the late nights and weekend jobs were taking a toll on their family life.

Seeking regular work hours more conducive to family life, the Wrobels developed a wholesale food business, Higher Taste, in 1987. From the beginning, Higher Taste was a family effort. Their two sons and two daughters became taste testers in the garage-converted-kitchen (and the inspiration behind the basic bean-and-cheese burrito) and accompanied their parents on delivery rounds.

The family experimented with a variety of dishes: sandwiches, burritos, salads and quiche. They focused on quality, and the business grew organically. Their big break came when a buyer from Fred Meyer supermarket chain discovered their burritos while eating lunch at a local food cooperative. Not long after, the supermarket giant began carrying their products on its shelves.

Sons Jonathan and Abe, now grown with families of their own, have been at the helm of Higher Taste for a decade. Jonathan leads day-to-day operations, while Abe oversees the delivery system and truck schedules. Numbered among the company's 28 employees are other family members as well: Jonathon's wife, Kathleen Wrobel, is the head



*Higher Taste owners, left to right: Jonathan Wrobel, Abraham Wrobel, Rhonda Wrobel and Hans Wrobel
Photo credit: Austin Family Business Program, Oregon State University*

bookkeeper and Abe's wife, Hailey Wrobel, manages human resources.

"It's really been wonderful to have them involved," Rhonda Wrobel says of the second generation, which has helped Higher Taste use technology to its advantage.

"In the old days, we did everything manually," she said. "Our children brought us into the computer age, which has allowed us to handle more volume."

Higher Taste's vegetarian and vegan products are now sold in 170 locations, including stores, schools and hospitals, in Oregon and surrounding states.

Having outgrown their current 4,000-square-foot production facility, the Wrobels are building their dream kitchen on farm land in Cornelius. When completed later this year, Higher Taste's new 17,000-square-foot processing plant will allow the company to take on some of the business it has been turning away and convert its line of fresh burritos to offer a frozen option.

Meanwhile, the Wrobel family has grown too. A third generation — the grandchildren of Hans and Rhonda — is already showing interest in the family business and has even appeared in instructional videos on the website.

Through generations, the family has gained a multitude of wisdom: Keep operations simple, maintain open communications, delegate responsibility and — above all — focus on quality.

"We take pride in what we offer people," Rhonda says. "We're sticklers on consistency and quality, that's why we've been successful."