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## Organic fare finds fans in child care

*Small business taps underserved market with tasty snacks, prepared meals*

By Jodi Kerr  
 For the Capital Press

When Evann Remington went to find suitable daycare for her 2-year-old daughter, a safe and clean facility that served healthy organic lunches and snacks topped the list of wants.

The options for safe and clean were plentiful, but the non-existent organic nutrition at daycare and schools was a problem that morphed into a catalyst for a growing business.

Instead of settling for non-organic fare, she founded the company Organic Fresh Fingers, Inc., and began supplying preschools with fresh prepared lunches and snacks made of local foods.

"I am not messing around," she said. "I wanted to grow rapidly and do it right."

Remington, CEO of Salem-based Organic Fresh Fingers, said her company started with one daycare facility and has grown to 14. She wants the industry as a whole to grow, because more organic food manufacturers means better business for organic farming in general.

"Oregon farmers have had to step up production because of the sustainability of food in the local area," said Tim Wood, product placement manager at Northwest Natural Foods, LLC, in Eugene, Ore.

"We have grown by leaps and bounds," he said. "I joined the company in 2006. We had five Oregon manufacturers, and we had six routes. Now in 2008, we have 16 manufacturers that we distribute for and we have 21 routes."

There is no sign of a limit to growth.

"We have six to eight inquiries a week from Oregon start-ups," Wood said. Companies are looking for ways to get organic products mainstreamed and onto grocery store shelves.

Delivering fresh meals to daycare is a start, but Organic Fresh Fingers will be rolling out a frozen organic lunch line in local grocery stores and co-ops in March.

"It is an organic frozen meal," said Wood. "Remington's product meets all the USDA Child and Adult Food Program Standards for nutrition and is different than other processed snack-type foods in the non-organic market."

While the smiley-face hummus pizza is geared toward children, adults also can appreciate a healthy, organic and convenient meal grown in the Northwest. Daycare teachers and employees have increased orders to include a lunch for themselves and their classes.

"We have the organic spaghetti with lentils, organic hummus pizza, and organic quiche to name a few," Remington said. "We offer vegan, vegetarian and wheat-free options so there should be something for everyone."

Demand has grown for organic foods and the cost difference between organic and non-organic is beginning to even out, according to Wood. "Organic foods are more available and the demographics and demand are changing," he said.

Because Organic Fresh Fingers meals are geared toward children, they have to taste good. Moureene Taylor of Little Cottage Preschool in Beaverton, Ore., knows that the taste bud of a child is a tough customer.

"Most kids are so used to McDonald's and fast food these days, I wasn't so sure about how our kids would respond to hummus pizza," Taylor said. "The kids love it, I love it, and the parents love it. It's so convenient and cost-effective, and the kids really enjoy it."

Organic manufacturing and farmers are growing side-by-side, and both are becoming more diversified and product-specific.

"Customers are looking for products that are local," Wood said. In Organic Fresh Fingers' case, every meal served came from within a day's drive of Salem.

"Customers want to know where their food comes from," he said. "Customers are concerned about their carbon footprint and how many miles food travels before it hits their table."



Taiga Shimma opens wide for Oregon organic strawberries with local organic yogurt. Little Cottage Pre-school in Beaverton has started using the company Organic Fresh Fingers, who supplies all organic lunches and snacks to pre-schools and daycare facilities in Oregon.

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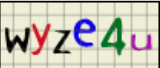


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