

GROWING ORGANIC, GROWING CHILDREN, AND GROWING BUSINESS IN OREGON

By: Jodi Kerr For the Capital Press

When Evann Remington went to find suitable daycare for her two-year-old daughter, a safe and clean facility that served healthy organic lunches and snacks topped the wants list. 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 Portland, Beaverton, and Salem, Oregon 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," said Remington, CEO of Organic Fresh Fingers, based in Salem, Oregon. The start-up company started with one daycare facility and has grown to fourteen.

For organic foods farmers, the more organic food manufactures that come on board, the better that is for the business of organic farming. "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, Oregon. "We distribute organic foods and we have grown by leaps and bounds," Wood said. "I joined the company in 2006, we had five Oregon manufactures, and we had six routes. Now in 2008, we have 16 manufactures that we distribute for and we have 21 routes."

Growth is showing no signs of stopping. "We have six to eight inquires a week from Oregon start-ups," Woods said. Companies are looking for ways to get organic products mainstreamed and on to grocery store shelves.

Delivering fresh meals to daycare is a start, but Organic Fresh Fingers will be rolling out the frozen organic lunch line-up 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."

Daycare teachers and employees have upped the orders to include a lunch for themselves and their classes. Sure the smiley face hummus pizza is geared towards children, but there is no reason an adult can't appreciate a healthy organic convenient meal grown in the Northwest. "We have the 'Organic Spaghetti with Lentils', 'Organic Hummus Pizza', and 'Organic Quiche' to name a few. We offer vegan, vegetarian and wheat free options so there should be something for everyone," Remington said. Suggested retail is about \$5.00 and will give parents an option for schools that do not serve organic and vegetarian foods.

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

Since Organic Fresh Fingers meals are geared towards children, they have to taste good. Moureene (Spelling ok) Taylor of Little Cottage Preschool in Beaverton, Oregon, 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."

As Organic Fresh Fingers catches on and goes mainstream, Remington is thinking ahead and reaching out for the next part of her business plan. "My long term goal is to continue to grow my company," Remington said. "I want to set up national distribution for retail and franchise the wholesale side of the business so I can offer an opportunity to others who want to own a business, service schools, and deliver organic local meals in their area."