

Sweet, Dried, and Natural

Patsy Flanigan's Flanigan Farms pioneered natural food snacks

Free association: What brand name comes to mind when you hear "dry-roasted peanuts"? You may think of Planters, but Patsy Flanigan '79 says that her firm, Flanigan Farms, originated the product and got it to the market first. It was one of several natural dried fruit and nut products that Flanigan Farms pioneered.

We take such products for granted now, but that wasn't the case in 1970, when Flanigan Farms was founded. Raw nuts weren't available out of the shell. Packagers believed people wouldn't eat them unless they were doused with oil and salt. Even Patsy and her late husband, Owen, were skeptical whether people would accept them and were pleasantly surprised by when the product sold.

Patsy and Owen founded the firm in 1970. Because Owen was an unemployed aerospace engineer, they needed a livelihood. And because Patsy was a girl scout leader who was dismayed

of almonds and fruit and taste-tested it among our employees. We grew Fuyu persimmons on our farms and found them delicious," so they incorporated that fruit. Altogether Flanigan Farms packages 32 products, sells them to major grocery chains in Southern California, and also creates special baskets and gift jars.

Each new product is a case of trial and error. A mixture with carb-coated nuts "bombed," she acknowledges—"but then we realized it wasn't that healthy a product."

Flanigan Farms was well underway when Patsy, who had worked part time in schools, decided to get her B.S. at CSUN, majoring in family environmental sciences and taking courses with Tom Chen, head of the Marilyn Magaram Center, and Nancy Owens, among others. She found helpful both specific knowledge, about food sanitation methods, for instance, and also general methods

operations; Monica Heeren heads the merchandising. In addition, Patsy pays tribute to the firm's 14 employees and its 18 independent distributors. "The company is people," she says.

Apart from the business, which is located in Culver City, Flanigan devotes her time to the Culver City Chamber of Commerce, the Didi Hirsch Community Mental Health Center, and the American Heart Association. She also belongs to the Nutrition and Health Council, headquartered in Washington, D.C., and writes a monthly nutrition and health column

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—Patsy Flanigan on what she's proudest of...

about the lack of good healthy snack foods for her girls (the couple had four girls of their own) natural snacks were the natural result.

"We didn't have a lot of competition when we started. We were at the forefront of the natural foods movement," she recalls. "The markets accepted the products readily because people had started to ask for them"—the result, perhaps, of the back-to-the-land movement that was one consequence of the late '60s hippie experiment.

The Flanigans began with products like granola and trail mix, selling to smaller independent markets. As sales increased, they mechanized the operation. Owen used his engineering skills to design the firm's machines and later to modify existing machines.

The product line grew by experimentation. "One of our distributors couldn't eat peanuts, so we put together a mix

of inquiry—how to find out what she needed to know.

Although the product line found initial acceptance, the years have brought a lot of struggle since. "It's been like pushing a snowball up a mountain," Flanigan says.

1992 was especially hard. Her husband died; some employees left because they expected the business to fold. That year's riots closed stores; and it, along with the recession, caused a lot of Southern Californians to move elsewhere, which decreased sales.

Flanigan worked 12-hour days, in part to ease her grief and also to keep the business going. She kept the machines running and made sales calls. To expand the market, the firm went north to Fresno and the Central Coast.

Two of the children have joined the family business. Catherine Flanigan oversees the computer and financial



Photos by Irfan Khan

for Los Angeles Independent Newspapers. You can read it in such papers as the Culver City Chronicle and the Westsider.

She also spends time at Flanigan Farms (the place, not the business), a 10-acre certified organic farm in San Diego County, where the family grows persimmons and feijoa, a variety of guava.

Asked what she's proudest of, she replies, "That we've been copied so much. The small companies innovate and the big ones copy. It's a fact of life." ■