

SMALL BUSINESSES OF THE YEAR

Success stories

Silver Spring Foods earns annual recognition from local chamber

By Liam Marlaire
Leader-Telegram staff

Connie's Pep-padew Jerky, Thrilled Cheese Sandwich and Barbecued Swordfish in Herb Marinade.

Such unusual concoctions are among the 136 recipes available on the Web site for Eau Claire-based

Foods, the world's largest grower and processor of horseradish.

Who knew there were such eclectic uses for a spicy root vegetable? Probably not Ellis Huntsinger, who founded Huntsinger Farms and its subsidiary, Silver Spring Foods, in 1929. Huntsinger prepared and bottled horseradish by hand in a milk shed behind his house to supplement his income.

Today the company ships hundreds of products across the United States and to a few overseas markets. It has about 100 full-time employees in Eau Claire and dozens more at other locations. It's owned by Huntsinger's granddaughter, Nancy Bartusch

Rygg, and her sons, Eric and Ryan Rygg.

The company's success was rewarded Tuesday when the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce named Silver Spring Foods its Small Business of the Year for companies with 26 or more employees.

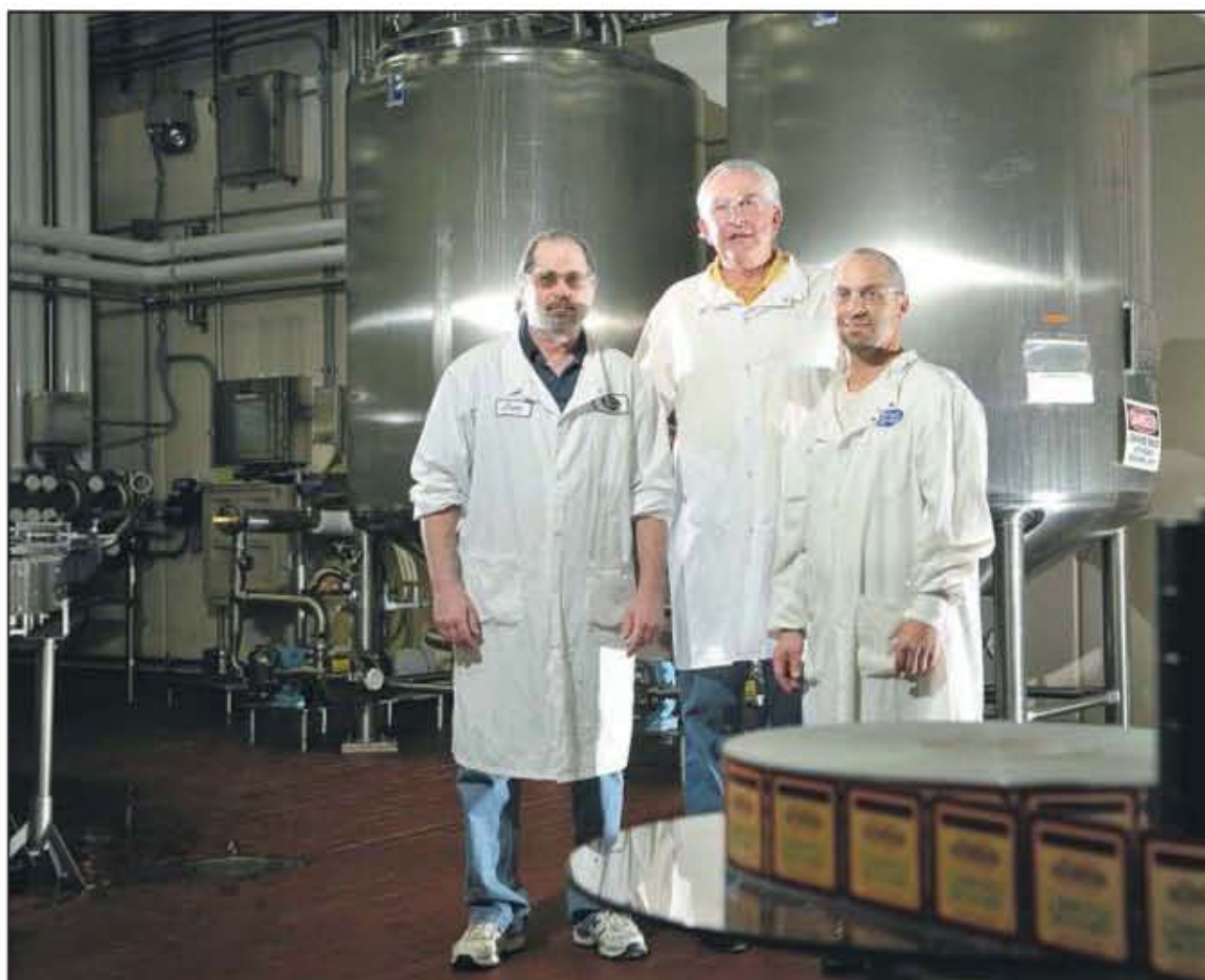
"It really is a great honor," said Mike Walsh, company president. "We

do a lot for the community and hope to do a lot more."

"I was very pleased that Silver Spring gained the recognition," added Eric. "Especially now when times are tough in the economy, Silver Spring has managed to grow, hire more employees and develop a foundation for future growth."

Walsh and George Rygg, Eric and Ryan's father, were fraternity brothers at Stanford University. The families grew close over the years, and Walsh came to Silver Spring for "a little consulting work" last year. Nancy asked if he wanted a more permanent role.

"It was like having a sister asking if you can help out," he said. "I'm com-



Silver Spring Foods recently won the Eau Claire Area Chamber of Commerce's Small Business of the Year award. Pictured, from left, are Curt Freseth, planner/scheduler; Mike Walsh, president; and Patrick Lehman, vice president of manufacturing.

mitted for as long as I'm needed."

Walsh returns home to California as often as possible to rejoin his wife, Lynne, who runs a clinic for the homeless in Marin County.

Family tragedy

Nancy's father, Edwin Bartusch, was running the company in 1972 when he and his wife, Betty, died in a plane accident. Nancy's sister, Barbara, and her husband also perished in the crash. The group was en route to a meeting with George and Nancy in Aspen, Colo.

Nancy inherited the

company when she was only 22 years old and one year into the Master of Business Administration program at Stanford. She and George, a retired doctor, live in California. Ryan has a doctorate in physics and works for a laboratory in Livermore, Calif.

Eric remains hands-on as the company's marketing manager.

Freshness key

Horseradish is harvested over three- to four-week periods in the spring and fall. Many of the seasonal workers for Silver Spring, one of whom is 89, are veterans in the company.

"It supplements their income, they enjoy doing it and they're good at it," Walsh said.

It's not uncommon to find Silver Spring employees with more than 30 years of service to the company.

"There's a lot of loyalty to the family and the business," said Patrick Lehman, vice president of manufacturing.

Silver Spring's location in Eau Claire features massive dry and cold storage rooms in a state-of-the-art, 150,000-square-foot production facility. A test kitchen that looks like a movie set is the site for

research, product tasting and company events.

"Quality (control) is extraordinarily important to us," Walsh said.

The highly automated operation features more than 10 miles of piping. Horseradish is transported from fields in Wisconsin and Minnesota to the production facility in thousand-pound batches. It's fed into a grinding room in which 6,000 pounds of the root can be ground in 10 minutes. The room is cooled to keep the roots "as hot and spicy as we can," Walsh said.

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Staff photo by Shane Opatz

Lou Wanda Heath, an operator, works in the bottling room at Silver Spring Foods, 2424 Alpine Road.

Honor/Company praised for working environment

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The product is then moved into blenders where hundreds of formulas are used to modify flavors. It's then tested in a lab before being fed into a bottling room. The entire process takes less than 24 hours.

In a cooking room used for certain products that is only a year old, food must maintain its temperature as its piped about 350 feet to bottling equipment that can be adapted for containers ranging from 5 ounces to 275 gallons. Bottles in one section pass through equipment armed with cameras to detect imperfections. More than 100 bottles can be filled and labeled within minutes.

"About 50 percent of our time is spent in production," said Lehman. "The other half is spent cleaning the equipment."

Dedicated staff

Horseradish is the company's signature product, which it offers in dozens of varieties, but it also sells other mustards and sauces. Hundreds of finished goods are produced at the plant and the company has co-packaging agreements



Deetz

with companies such as Kikkoman. Silver Spring products are available at various retail outlets and its headquarters. Web sales have increased significantly over the past 12 months, Walsh said.

Curt Freseth, who provides scheduling and planning for the bottling operations, has been at the company for 33 years.

"We've got a lot of employees who have been here long term," he said, "and there's a reason they're here. I've really enjoyed working for this company."

Pat Deetz, vice president of operations, oversees an area that produces a variety of small condiment packets. She's worked at Silver Spring for 16 years.

"I love the problem-solving of the machines," she said. "If you take ownership in your machine, you take more pride in the work you do."

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