

Pardon The Eruption

By Tom Fielding

There are numerous ways for a fledgling company to introduce a break-out product, but I would venture an assumption that not many of them received their first big break by way of volcanic eruption. Dream Foods International LLC can honestly say that its Italian Volcano Blood Orange Juice literally gives you more “bang” for your buck.

Let me digress. Adriana Kahane, who had recently completed a feasibility study in the University of Southern California MBA program, founded the company in 1998. “I had an idea to ship Sicilian blood oranges to California,” she said. Since California is such a huge citrus provider, many thought Kahane’s idea a little crazy. But as an entrepreneur Kahane persevered in her goal to have this citrus shipped to the Golden State.

Kahane hooked up with Melissa’s/World Variety Produce, who obviously thought she was not crazy, and in 1999 “we shipped two container loads of oranges, and they sold well.” So well, in fact, that the next year they shipped more than 10 containers filled with the tasty Italian fruit.

The European Union has designated this small region in eastern Sicily as a special zone to grow these red oranges. One of the major trademarks of the blood oranges is their consistent sweet taste and juicy nature.

Things were looking up in 2003, as more and more customers lined up to buy the blood oranges, but Mother Nature (aka Mount Etna) had other ideas. In 2003, Mount Etna blew her top more than usual, and suddenly the soil near the volcano was covered in black ash.

“People were walking around under umbrellas to protect themselves from the ash,” Kahane said. Unfortunately (at the time) for Kahane, there weren’t enough umbrellas to protect the orange growing area. Those delectable oranges, which previously had an extended shelf life of 90 days, now had a life expectancy of only 30 days.

Presented with the challenge of seeing all these oranges now going to processors, Kahane had to make a decision. Like a navigator in the middle of a storm, she changed course. Kahane decided that like being handed a lemon and making lemon-aid, she’d been handed oranges, so she’d make orange juice – blood orange juice. “The only thing bad about the oranges was the flesh. The inside of the fruit was still very, very good.”

Since she had spent so much time in the area, she already had a good working relationship with a processor who said he would be able to bottle the juice. But would consumers be interested?

“I had to find out if there was anyone interested in the product,” Kahane said, “so I set up a little booth at the Natural Products West show in Anaheim to gauge interest. Two months later, we were shipping this organic juice to the U.S.”

The first orders for the product came from the natural and specialties store sector, but it quickly became a two-tiered invasion as traditional retailers started ordering blood orange juice.

Kahane said, “We hear from chefs who love to cook with the blood orange juice, and consumers love it because it has all the antioxidants

of a red fruit with all the vitamin C of orange juice. It’s like you’re getting a twofer.”

Kahane soon realized that the Sicilian growing area afforded her other juice opportunities. The blood orange juice was followed up with other new products, including tangerine juice and a squeezable Volcano Lemon Burst.

She said what differentiates Dream Foods’ lemon juice from the others is its flavor and smell. “We realized what was missing in other lemon juice products was the zest, so we attempted to bottle a lemon juice that actually replicated a fresh lemon, both in taste and in smell.”

She took the cap off the lemon juice, poured it into a glass, and after one whiff, I knew that this was not your father’s lemon juice. The aroma was incredible and the flavor intense. For a moment I felt I was tasting a fresh lemon on the slopes of Mount Etna (without the ash, of course).

Getting me back on track, she said that people e-mail her on the different ways they use the juice. “One guy said he always has the Volcano Burst Lemon Juice on his desk and puts it in his water throughout the day.”

Even with all these things going for it, getting retailers to purchase the Volcano Lemon Burst (the company also markets a Volcano Lime Burst) does have its challenges. “The biggest challenge,” Kahane said, “is trying to make lemon and lime juice sound sexy, so we came up with our ‘Get a Burst with Every Squeeze’ campaign. We believe and have seen that once people try our juice, they remain loyal.”

Kahane knows that she is selling a niche line with her Italian Volcano Blood Orange and Tangerine Juice and she must continue to educate both retailers and consumers about the many benefits of her products. “We have seen that if it is merchandised with orange juice, it makes a great extra buy for people.”

She also said a retail display in a hanging basket featuring the lemon and lime squeezable juices is both an attractive and shelf-saving opportunity for retailers. Dream Foods International has achieved good

growth since the juice lines have started, and Kahane believes that as more and more conventional retailers take notice of her products, the increase in sales will continue. There are consumer recipe cards for all the products.

As founder of the company, Kahane has one major perk that we would all like to have. Each year she travels to Italy to meet with suppliers, work on product development and presumably eat great pasta. She envisions more unique products will be in the future Dream Foods International pipeline as opportunities presents themselves.

Hopefully that opportunity doesn’t arise from another eruption since Kahane and her husband have recently purchased an old tangerine farm on the slopes of Mt. Etna.

