NewsBank



Jane and Joseph Rodebaugh, and her son Jordan Plotkin, are concentrating on salads

Journal photo by Ronald M. Overdahl

Catering to the deli dependents

Changing lifestyles increase company's sales

By MILDRED FREESE
of The Journal staff

As more and more people stop at a deli on their way home from work, Jane Rodebaugh sees her business continuing to grow.

As president of Country Maid Inc., she has led the relocation of the small family-owned company into a $1.6 million new plant and redirected the company to a threefold increase in sales of prepared foods in the last eight years.

"This is a growing industry," Rodebaugh said. "People my children's age expect to be two-income families. The biggest social change taking place today is the need to be a two-income family."

With women working outside the home, they can't also be doing all the cooking as they once were expected to do, she said. As a result, people are buying more prepared foods, and Rodebaugh expects that trend to grow.

"All who are in the business are looking to expand," she said. Her perspective is broader than her own firm because she is president-elect of Salad Manufacturers Association, an industry group, and has visited European and American prepared-food firms to learn more about food manufacturing.

Country Maid's business has expanded from annual sales of more than $1 million in 1980, when Rodebaugh bought it, to an anticipated $3 million in the firm's current fiscal year.

The firm had a sizable catering service when she acquired it, but that was dropped to concentrate on making salads for supermarket delicatessens within a four-hour drive of the plant, among them Roundy's, Gateway Foods in La Crosse and Schultz Sav-O in Sheboygan.

Today, employes at Country Maid make 1,200-pound batches of golden potato salad in waist-high stainless steel bowls. They deep fry potato baskets to sell at area supermarkets and to Marshall Field's, which fills them with turkey a la king. They also make other kinds of salads, and recently began making chicken salad and sugar-free gelatin salads.

The food is made in a sparkling, airy plant at 1919 S. Kinnickinnic Ave. The front entrance is landscaped with flowers and shrubbery to make the new plant a beauty spot in a neighborhood that includes some lackluster factories.

The two-and-a-third-acre site was purchased from the Milwaukee Redevelopment Authority for $49,000.

Rodebaugh chose the city location rather than one of the suburban sites she looked at primarily because many of the firm's employes ride buses to work, she said.

The firm was started by her mother, Irene Grebe, founder of Grebe Bakeries, and served as the delicatessen arm for the bakery stores as well as offering catering service.

Several factors went into Rodebaugh's decision to acquire the bakery. Her first husband, William Plotkin, died in 1976, leaving her with three of their six children still in need of a higher education.

She saw a possible source for funds for their education when her brother, W. James, found a buyer for the delicatessen firm in 1980 in an effort to divide up the family businesses.

The potential sale triggered her own thinking. "If I knew something about anything, it was food," she said. She had been a clerk in the Grebe stores before staying home to raise her children.

The year before the firm was up for sale, she had married Joseph Rodebaugh, an automation engineer who had been vice president of Keystone Automated Equipment Co., Philadelphia, before they married and who later worked for RPM Industries, Waukesha.

Early one morning as she was considering what she should do, she woke her new husband and said she wanted to have a talk. She told him she wanted to buy Country Maid.

He encouraged her to go ahead and agreed to help her. After about eight months, he joined her in running the firm. Today, she is president, he is vice president and three of her children, Laurie, John and Jordan, work in the firm.

"The first years all we did was buy equipment," Jane Rodebaugh said. But she also made a significant move in gaining the confidence of her customers by hiring a food scientist, Mohammad Elahi, who has a microbiology degree in food. He is a native of Iran who has become an American citizen.

"We made steady and substantial growth," she said, working in a 15,000-square-foot plant at 2424 N. 30th St.

In 1986, she began plans to build a new plant in a new location. She received help from the staffs of the Milwaukee Department of Redevelopment and the Milwaukee Economic Development Commission.

Financing was arranged through M&I Marshall and Ilsley Bank, with which she had had a long business relationship. Part of the loan for the project was guaranteed by the Small Business Administration, and the SBA backing enabled the firm to have a fixed-term loan for 20 years.

"There's no way you can get that long a term in a regular bank loan these days," she said. SBA loans require a full commitment by entrepreneurial borrowers who normally must use everything they own as collateral.

At the new location, there is enough room for Country Maid to nearly double the size of the 34,000-square-foot plant if the expansion is warranted in the future.

The new plant has a product-testing laboratory, a research-and-development kitchen, room to add more employes and space for a retail store, which she plans to open within a month.

Proud of the new plant and offices, the Rodebaughs, both in their 50s, also are pleased that the Milwaukee Health Department has asked if health inspectors could have a training session at the facility.

Loyce Robinson, consumer protection supervisor for the Health Department, said the idea of on-site training sessions was new. Although the training session has been requested, she hasn't decided whether it will be carried out there, she said.

The Rodebaughs also hope the company will become one of the first firms to qualify for self-inspection under new state rules. Presently, a US Department of Agriculture inspector works at the firm half time.

ENTREPRENEURS

Country Maid Inc.

- **Location:** 1919 S. Kinnickinnic Ave.
- **Employes:** 34.
- **Type of business:** Makes potato salad and other prepared foods for supermarket delicatessens.
- **Annual sales:** Expected to top $3 million in firm's fiscal 1988.

A weekly feature on people who have taken the plunge and gone into business for themselves.

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Milwaukee Journal (Milwaukee, Wisconsin), August 21, 1988: 51. *NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current*. https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=image/v2%3A1477BBDEA50EB75C%40EANX-NB-160D25C172113E56%402447395-160C7B4827713EC0%4050-160C7B4827713EC0%40.
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