

Carson's Cedarlane is a natural with natural foods

By Irma Widjojo Staff Writer

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Cedarlane Natural Foods founder Robert Atallah on the processing room floor of the company's Carson plant. (Robert Casillas/Staff Photographer)

Frozen and ready-made meals have become a staple for busy Americans.

Cedarlane Natural Foods Inc. offers these convenient foods while appealing to the more health-conscious customers.

The Carson company that has been around for almost three decades produces natural and

organic foods that come fresh or frozen.

"Our mission is cooking wholesome ingredients the way nature intended, the way your grandmothers cooked it in the old days," said Robert Atallah, founder of the company.

Natural food is food that is minimally processed using non-chemical ingredients.

Atallah started his business in 1981 as a 29-year-old, three years after he graduated with a master's degree in business administration from the University of West Los Angeles.

He came to the United States from Lebanon in 1974 after helping his brother set up a bakery in his homeland.

"I found out that whenever you are in the food industry you are going to be good," Atallah said of himself. "I pursued it and I was right that it was my thing and I'm glad I'm in it."

Cedarlane started as a one-man business in Venice, Calif., which has now turned into a six-building firm with 532 employees.

Atallah moved the headquarters to Carson 12 years ago.

Currently, the company also has facilities in Wilmington, downtown Los Angeles and Commerce.

However, Atallah's success has not always been

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About 16 years ago, Atallah said, his business hit a rough patch. While scrambling to adjust, the pressure from work led him to suffer a heart attack.

This turned out to be a blessing in disguise, Atallah said.

While he was trying to recuperate from his illness, he learned about the Zone Diet by Dr. Barry Sears, which promotes caloric consumption from carbohydrates, protein and fat in a balanced ratio.

Atallah said that after strictly following that diet, he went off all his medications and has not had any major health problems since.

"I became a believer," he said.

Atallah later met Sears, and they collaborated to create a line of frozen foods under the Cedarlane brand using the Zone Diet.

The Dr. Sears Zone food line caters to people dealing with various health problems such as diabetes and high cholesterol.

That has grown to become one of Atallah's main food brands.

"It's really a pleasure to be in a business where you can accumulate wealth while you're doing good to humanity," Atallah said.

He said that currently the company is thriving in its fresh food section, and is working with major grocery stores like Krogers, Albertsons and Vons.

Cedarlane sells frozen meals including burritos, pizza, lasagna and sandwich wraps.

For its fresh fare, Cedarlane does not sell individual products. Instead, Atallah said, the company provides supermarkets with all the ingredients needed to create different types of foods like ready-made salads and sandwiches. A market would only need to mix or combine the ingredients to serve to customers at its deli section.

About 30 percent of Cedarlane's fresh food is under private label, meaning a grocery stores sells it under its own name.

"Our fresh food is exploding," he said. "(Its growth) is outgrowing the frozen."

According to Atallah, 53 percent of the company's annual revenue of about \$70 million comes from the fresh food and 47 percent comes from the frozen counterpart.

John Gay, executive director and CEO of the Natural Products Association, said that natural products have fared "pretty well" during the recession.

"Natural food is definitely healthier than processed food," Gay said. "People buy natural

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food in order to maintain their health because it is cheaper to be healthy than sick in this economy."

Web site: www.cedarlanefoods.com

According to the trade publication Nutrition Business Journal, there was an 11.4 percent increase in sales of natural or organic food products in 2008, the latest year for such statistics. That amounted to \$29.7 billion in sales that year.

That is not to say that Atallah was unhurt by the recent downturn.

"When the hard times came we definitely were affected by it," he said. "We had to reformulate our concepts. We knew what the market can afford and what they want."

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BUSINESS WATCH

Company: Cedarlane Natural Foods Inc.

Founded: 1981

Location: 1135 E. Artesia Blvd., Carson

Products: Natural and organic foods that come fresh or frozen

Annual revenue: \$70-\$72 million

Employee: 523 employees

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