

HERE FOOD PROCESSORS CAN FIND BOUNTIFUL GROWTH



CAROLINAS GATEWAY PARTNERSHIP

ATLANTIC NATURAL FOODS STAYS AHEAD OF SURGE IN ‘FLEXITARIAN’ EATING

By Lawrence Bivins



Can Nash County be a global mecca for vegan foods?

In fact, it's well on its way. Since 2008, Atlantic Natural Foods has quietly tested and produced a wide variety of shelf-stable meat analogues from its 53,000-sq.-ft. base of operations at Nashville Industrial Center.

The company also maintains a distribution facility in Rocky Mount. And more growth is on the horizon. "We may be the best-kept secret in food development," says Doug Hines, chief executive officer of AFT Holdings, Atlantic Natural Foods' parent company. "We want to make Nashville, North Carolina a leading center for plant-based protein food creation for the future."

Hines points to surveys that anticipate fast growth for companies like Atlantic Natural Foods. Some 45 percent of Americans believe they should eat less meat, for example. Thirty-five percent report eating less meat than they did a year ago. About 20 percent of today's college students self-identify as vegetarians. "Millennials are driving this market," Hines says.

Trends also suggest a rise in demand for plant-based proteins from consumers simply wanting to reduce -not necessarily eliminate-meat from their diets. Terms like "Flexitarians," "Meatless Mondays" and "Vegan Before Six" now permeate discussions of where American eating habits are heading.

Budgetary, health and environmental issues are driving demand for more vegetarian and vegan foods. A four-serving can of Loma Linda Prime Stakes, a vegetarian product made by Atlantic Natural Foods, sells for \$8.40 on Amazon.com, about half what one 8-ounce top sirloin runs. The American Dietetic Association suggests plant-based diets lower blood pressure and cholesterol, as well as the risk for heart disease and

Type 2 diabetes.

Animal agriculture accounts for about 15 percent of greenhouse gases, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, leaving meat-eaters with a dramatically higher carbon footprint than their vegan and vegetarian counterparts.

"Market growth has certainly been a factor in our success," Hines explains, "but our ability to innovate and provide consumers with shelf-stable, portable, convenient, healthy and delicious options that they can seamlessly integrate into their lives is what sets Atlantic Natural Foods apart."

Seventh Day Adventists created what would become Atlantic's flagship brand in Loma Linda, Cal., over 125 years ago. Today, the line includes canned chile, chorizo, franks, taco filling, "fishless tuna" and other items. "Loma Linda has been helping people eat healthier since 1890," Hines says. "It has been at the forefront of the evolution in plant based protein, and its longevity and history of innovation make it one of the most respected brands in the industry."

Shelf-stable products add convenience for consumers. "Most vegetarian meal creations have been refrigerated and frozen, which are limited to evening occasions," Hines says. "Our focus has been on providing an alternative protein solution that doesn't need a freezer or refrigerator."

Another popular Atlantic brand is neat™, a line of nut-based eggless mixes for vegan pancakes, muffins, cookies and other baked foods. "Neat was created by a mom for her kids, and was developed around the idea of healthy, simple cooking in the home with clean ingredients," Hines explains. A San Diego couple developed the brand in 2011 and sold it to Atlantic in 2015. neat™ is packaged in pouches and distributed nationally through retailers like Target, Whole Foods and Kroger. Rounding out the company's offerings is its Kaffree Roma line of caffeine-free vegan beverage mixes.

At the heart of Atlantic's ambitious growth plans is its Nash County facility, which holds leading food safety and Kosher certifications. "Our Nashville, North Carolina location has also contributed to our success," says Hines. "The company has been committed to the area since 2008 with the factory growing to where it is today and a vision for further consolidation and expansion."

Headquartered in Louisiana and California, AFT Holdings also owns Maine-based Stonewall Kitchens, the largest fleet of tuna-fishing vessels in the western Pacific, high and medium-end residential properties around the U.S., a public relations firm and a European early-stage capital fund.

With a local workforce of more than 100, Atlantic Natural Foods is the second largest private employer in Nashville. "Our people are a big driving force behind our success," Hines says. "We want them to be invested in the company, so we invest in them." Entry level positions there pay about 33 percent higher than minimum wage and include generous benefits. "We have an eclectic group of employees, and we're proud of them," he says.

Hines' vision involves further diversification of Atlantic's product lines, which means expansion of the company's R&D, test kitchen and production operations in Nash County. He hopes to cultivate partnerships with food science experts at North Carolina universities. The strategy will bring more than additional hiring. "We're not just growing jobs," Hines says. "It's about creating a worldwide destination for vegan foods in eastern North Carolina."



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