

TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 25, 2014

FEELING THEIR OATS

Grainful looks to take flavored grain to dinner tables in Ithaca and beyond



From left, Jan Pajerski, of Ithaca, Jeannine Sacco, of Spencer, and Emily Eisenhut, of Ithaca, are the employees of food startup Grainful. They use the kitchen at F&T Distributing Company in Dryden to work on their meals made with steel-cut oats. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO

By **Olivia M. Hall**
Correspondent

Oats for dinner? Ithaca food startup Grainful answers that question with a resounding “Oh, yeah!” — and a line of all-natural, frozen entrées centered around steel-cut oats. Run by president Jan Pajerski and chief food officer Jeannine Sacco with the help of one employee, the young company recently introduced such flavors as unstuffed



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pepper, porcini mushroom chicken, vegetarian chili, and andouille sausage and oats into the market beyond Ithaca.

"Steel-cut oats can stand up to rice and pasta from a taste and texture standpoint," said Pajerski, who first came to Ithaca as a student of mechanical engineering at Cornell. "You're not getting this soupy, bland mush that some people associate with oatmeal."

Pairing the grain with flavors from cuisines around the world, Grainful's founders hope to create a brand-new category in the frozen food section and convince eaters that oats have much to offer beyond breakfast.

"If we're the brand that moves that concept forward, that could be a great opportunity for us," Pajerski said.

Oats for dinner were not the obvious choice when Pajerski, Sacco and a handful of Ithaca-area investors — working together as BeetNPath Inc. — set out four years ago to create a healthy, tasty and convenient food product.

First attempts included refrigerated prepared meals in modified atmosphere packaging, as well as ProATs, a line of microwavable, frozen steel-cut oats in a variety of breakfast flavors.

But during test runs on several regional college campuses, the entrepreneurs learned the refrigerated meals confused customers, who expected to find them in the frozen food section, and while ProATs were well received (and may eventually be relaunched under the Grainful name), they were just one of many options among breakfast oats.

"Without having lots of capital to build a brand and push our way onto the



Grainful markets four frozen entrées but hopes to be the brand that took oats beyond breakfast, according to President Jan Pajerski, of Ithaca. SIMON WHEELER / STAFF PHOTO

GRAINFUL

- » **Location:** 950 Danby Road, Suite 300, Ithaca.
- » **Employees:** 3.
- » **Officers:** President Jan Pajerski and chief food officer Jeannine Sacco.
- » **Flavors:** Unstuffed pepper, porcini mushroom chicken, vegetarian chili, and andouille sausage and oats.
- » **Products in test market:** 15.
- » **Product launch:** November 2012 to test market, broadly January 2014.
- » **Retail outlets:** 20, and growing quickly.
- » **Website:** grainful.com.

shelves, it was going to be really difficult for us," Pajerski said.

Enter Jeannine Sacco, whom Pajerski calls the "culinary genius behind all of this," and whose experience includes nearly 20 years in the restaurant and catering industry and training at the Culinary Institute of America and Cornell.

"For a long time, I just really wanted to make jambalaya with steel-cut oats," Sacco said. "It's a unique dish with some really intense flavors, and it's not something you'd just come home and make for dinner on a weeknight. So my partners said, go ahead, make it."

The savory experiment was a success. "When I got to the point where everyone could try the dish, I think it surprised us all," Sacco said. "And they asked, 'what else can you make with this?'"

Considering the grain's health benefits — Pajerski and Sacco cited high levels of fiber and

protein, as well as cholesterol-lowering beta-glucans — and a renaissance of oats in the market, the entrepreneurs believed they were onto something with real potential.

"But whether people will take money out of their pockets and pay for it is a very different thing," Sacco said. "So we knew we needed to get into some actual stores and see what's going to happen."

Grainful has found willing partners in Lansing Market and P&C Fresh on East Hill in Ithaca, where since November 2012, Sacco regularly cooks, packages and demonstrates Grainful entrées, collecting sales numbers and feedback from customers.

"Those stores gave us carte blanche; we were really lucky," she said. "And the sales were amazing."

Grainful's initial success attracted enough angel funding from investors to propel a launch this January of select dishes in independent

grocery stores and on several college campuses across the state. By the end of 2014, Pajerski hopes to find the entrées in up to 500 retail locations in the Northeast.

For now, Sacco oversees production at a contract manufacturer in western Massachusetts — the closest USDA-inspected facility with the capability and willingness to work with the startup's relatively small, 600-pound batches — but the company hopes to someday accumulate sufficient capital to build its own facility.

At the same time, Sacco continues to develop ever new variations on oats for dinner.

"I do tons of research," she said. "I'm constantly reading different food magazines to see what's trending today, and I look at what the local restaurants are doing for their specials, because that's when chefs can get really creative. We want bold flavors, bold ingredients, not your everyday dishes."

Five vegetarian frozen entrées, including Thai curry and ratatouille, are being tested at P&C Fresh and Lansing Market, soon to be followed by six additional dishes with meat. Customer favorites may make it into the regular lineup in the future.

In the long run, Pajerski hopes a whole host of oat products, such as packaged, dry steel-cut oats, or combo spice packs, will brandish the Grainful logo.

"Our vision is not to be a frozen entrée company, but the oats for dinner company," Pajerski said. "Maybe in five to ten years, when people think about what to cook for dinner, they'll have a bag of steel-cut oats in their pantry and use that once in a while, just like pasta or rice. If we're successful, we'll be seen as the brand that took oats beyond breakfast."