

Best Cooking Pulses Inc., Portage la Prairie, Man.



(Left to right) Best Cooking Pulses' Margaret Hughes, vice-president of Sales and Marketing; Mike Gallais, vice-president, Operations; and Trudy Heal, president.

As luck would have it, in B.C. in the 1930s, a canner went bankrupt. It's not shocking considering it was the Great Depression, but it left Stephen Heal and Chauncey Eckhert with a huge crop of peas. The two berry farmers had ventured into pea production for the canner, and now had to figure out how else to recoup their efforts. So they flipped a coin to see who would go east to Quebec to try to sell the crop to soup manufacturers. Eckhert won the toss and sold two boxcars of peas. And that, says Margaret Hughes, is how Best Cooking Pulses Inc. was born.

Today the company is headquartered in Manitoba, where it mills pulse flours and pea fibre, and has an operation in Saskatchewan that produces whole peas, chickpeas and lentils. The company's products retail primarily online at CanadaOnly.ca, CanadaWell.ca and on Amazon.com.

Hughes, who is vice-president of Sales and Marketing for the company,

is also Heal's granddaughter. Eventually, Heal bought out Chauncey's interest and was joined in the business by his three sons, Jack, Ronald and Geoff. Hughes and her sister Trudy and another partner, Mike Gallais, have managed the business since 2004, when dad Geoff passed away and another sister left the company.

According to Hughes, at that time Best Cooking Pulses "was in this commodity world that had become very competitive." Revamping the company was a challenge. It offered a healthy food source, a product that had been a staple in people's diet for thousands of years, and that was high in protein, fibre and micronutrients, and low in fat. Not to mention, says Hughes, the sustainability story. "Peas require low irrigation, low inputs in terms of fertilizer and pesticides. There's no better crop than a pulse in terms of stewardship of the world," she explains. But how could that story be made compelling and sexy?

The company began by attempting to raise the legume's profile, producing a newsletter for consumers and food product formulators. They launched a portal on their website called "Are you a clever cookie?" with the latest research on pulses. And they've been working with Quadra Ingredients over the past year, which, says Hughes, has helped to arrange meetings with food processors to discuss using pulse flours in their products in a "health by stealth" move — a manoeuvre to get more pulses out to

more consumers. In fact, says Hughes, in the next six months several products are launching in Canada and in the U.S. using their flours. "It's just so exciting," she adds. "How often can you sell something that is good for people, good for the world? There's no downside, none at all." ■

Q&A

Q: What is your marketing goal?

A: "If you could replace 10 or 15 per cent of the flour in bread, or use a pulse flour to make a gluten-free cookie, it would be higher in protein, fibre and micronutrients and have less fat. Some of the flours used in gluten-free diets are really deficient in goodness. That's been our marketing goal — to shift from commodity and identify niche markets, where there's a need for more healthful foods."

Q: What does the Clever Cookie portal on your website provide?

A: "Research to do with flavour issues, protein quality, actual papers on formulation. It's not related to our pulse flours per se, but it gives formulators access to independent research in one place. We can see in the analytics that a lot of people are looking at it."