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## **Heartland Ingredients: A gluten-free alternative**

- There's a big market for it, Sorenson says

by Natalie J. Ostgaard, City Editor

While the majority of people around the world can tolerate gluten, a protein found in wheat, barley, rye, and oats, many can't go near the substance or they suffer dire health consequences. Until recently, designing a healthy, balanced diet that provides tasty foods without so much as a smidgen of gluten has been difficult, if not impossible.

Enter Heartland Ingredients, a new product line of gluten-free pastas and flours. Since the joint venture between farmer cooperatives FarmConnect (primarily Minnesota producers) and Michigan Edible Bean Growers began selling its products made from edible beans less than three months ago, it's already made a splash for sufferers of celiac disease and in the health food market.

"We're really excited about this," said Dr. Brent Sorenson, chief operating officer of Heartland Ingredients LLC and associate professor of agriculture business at the University of Minnesota. "We were selling very lightly in November and December, but will start pushing more sales now, after the new year."

The products are currently sold over the Internet at [www.heartlandingredients.com](http://www.heartlandingredients.com), as well as through two distributors. Sorenson added that the foods are already being sold in seven states and are gradually moving into retail outlets, currently in Michigan and on the East Coast.

"The market seems to be more ready than we are," he joked. The company is working through some packaging and other issues before proceeding with more aggressive marketing.

### Developing a product

The co-ops began looking at innovative bean markets several years ago, and discovered, through a survey conducted in conjunction with the Celiac Sprue Association and the University of Nebraska, that there was a desperate need for good tasting foods high in protein and fiber but without gluten, Sorenson explained. After intensive market research and a series of development steps involving public and private foods development experts, the products made from pinto, navy and black beans were launched.

"It's just a niche people really need filled," he said, "a desperate market looking for a product. That's where market analysis came in.

"The problem with beans is that they have a distinct flavor and aftertaste," he went on. "So we used some of our same soy processing technology (used at the SoyLink plant in Iowa), which

turns beans into an extremely high-protein, high-fiber powder, stabilizes the powder so it can be stored at room temperature for about a year, and eliminates that beany flavor."

Bakers and nutritionists have developed recipes that are very tasty, said Sorenson. In fact, he said, children and others who don't require gluten-free diets have enjoyed the foods made with Heartland products so much they eat them regularly.

The pastas, currently available in elbow, spaghetti and rotini shapes, cook in about a third of the time as regular pastas, are much more nutritious, and "taste great," according to nutrition specialist Carol Fenster, Ph.D. in her review of the products.

The flours, which offer an alternative to rice or sorghum flours traditionally used by celiacs, each work well in particular recipes, according to Heartland's Website. Pinto flour is mild and appropriate for baked goods. Navy bean flour can be used in baked goods and pasta, while black bean flour is fitting for chocolate products and adding nutrition to a snack.

Although Heartland's products might appear to be an instant success, Sorenson pointed out that each step in the development ladder - soy developing, research, analysis, marketing, etc. - added up to a product about 25 years in the making.

#### Looking to the future

Heartland has developed a pinto bean-rice cereal that will soon be ready to market, Sorenson said. It's been taste-tested and "we're looking at adding just a light sugar coating to appeal to the kids, dress it up a bit."

Although Heartland's focus right now is gluten-free products, he said the company may, in the future, look at developing products for restrictive diet needs, such as low glycemic foods.

The products are currently produced in several locations and packaged in Michigan. The Northern Crops Institute at North Dakota State University has provided significant production assistance, Sorenson said.

Within the next month, the company plans to open a packaging and shipping facility in space leased at the Agricultural Utilization and Research Institute building on the UMC campus, he added. Eventually, he'd like to see a facility put up in or near Crookston for production, once the business takes off.

#### Sustainable connection

Sorenson helped organize FarmConnect when he was with AURI and later worked with the co-op while he was in charge of agricultural matters at Northern Great Plains, Inc. Heartland Ingredients is a perfect example, he said, of what can be accomplished when many heads come together with individual ideas.

"This is an example of the kind of work we can do by really investing all our resources," he said. "We converted a 15- to 20-cent bean into a \$4 product and helped a group that is desperately in need of better food products.

"What's neat about this is that dry edible beans are a rotation crop, so it helps with working on land management as well."

Heartland Ingredients fits in well with a proposed Center for Sustainable Development at the UMC campus, he explained, because of all this and more.

"It's an opportunity for us to help the region by commercializing products and providing the energy needed, using the great expertise we have," he said.