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Career Journal

How I Got Here: Perseverance Answers Vegans' Prayers

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[Tales From The Career Ladder]

Ascending the career ladder is a different experience for everyone. This new column, "How I Got Here," looks at individual climbs and the lessons learned along the way.

Seth Tibbott, inventor of Tofurky and founder and president of Turtle Island Foods

How I got to here in 10 words or less: Stuck with it until it worked.

Before tofu turkey substitutes like Tofurky landed in supermarket freezer aisles, many vegetarians weren't able to easily share the holiday dinner table experience with friends. "I was tired of piling baked potatoes and yams on my plate," says Mr. Tibbot.

That's one of the reasons he started his Hood River, Ore., company, which sold 275,634 Tofurky Roasts in 2007, along with other products like Tofurky hot dogs and deli slices. The company has seen sales double between 2003 and 2007 as a growing number of nonvegetarian eaters include meat substitutes in their diet. This is how Mr. Tibbot, now 57, created his career and Tofurky:

How long have you been a vegetarian?

Since 1974. I had just become a vegetarian after reading "Diet for a Small Planet" by Frances Moore Lappe. She pointed out the inefficiencies in animal production. You put in 15 pounds of grain in one side and get one pound of meat protein out the other. That resonated with me.

You were a teacher after college -- a far cry from tofu product creation. What led you to teaching?

I started teaching for outdoor schools in Oregon. It was part-time. They paid us \$150 a week with room and board, which to me was a small fortune.

When Ronald Reagan took office, the money dried up for these outdoor-education programs.

So did Ronald Reagan play a role in your career change -- and getting into the soy business?

I wouldn't go that far. I had been making tempeh for three or four years for friends out of an incubator (made of an old refrigerator). It's a kind of soy-bean cake. I remembered back in college, yogurt and granola were these esoteric products you could only find in a few shops. Six or seven years later, you have entire aisles of granola and yogurt at stores. I thought it would be the same with tempeh and soy products. (In 1980) I started trying to sell it full time.

Did you take any business courses or go back to school to bolster your business acumen when you launched the company?

I did take some workshops at a small business association. I remember in one class, the instructor asked if any of us was out to save the world. Of course, my hand went right up. I think I was the only one. He then asked how many of us were out to make a lot of money. Everybody in the room raised their hands and cheered, I thought, "Oh man, I failed my first test."

You started the business more officially in 1982 by borrowing money from your brother and mother. How did you keep things going after that?

I tried to live as cheaply as I could in the beginning. In 1984, I built a tree house which I lived in until 1992. I paid \$25 a week to a guy who was renting the trees out for that express purpose. I had a wood stove, a phone and hot and cold running water.

My brother (currently Turtle Island's vice president) came into the business around 1987. He bought a large share of the company.

Where were your products sold initially?

We started selling tempeh in small health-food stores in the Northwest and the West Coast. We also mail orders to the East Coast. We'd send products through Federal Express. Tofurky broadened our reach and United Natural Foods picked the products up nationwide. We broke even for the first 15 years. Once Tofurky came along, we were profitable.

Where did the idea for Tofurky come from?

I had been to dozens of Thanksgiving dinners where we tried to make something to substitute for turkey. It was never very good. For us, it was always eight vegetarians sitting around a table.

In reality, the market is more like one or two people going to a turkey dinner and eating a baked potato and salad and getting laughed at while everybody else has this fabulous turkey experience.

Our first product was a 3.5-pound roast with eight tempeh drumsticks and a tub of gravy. It was an eight-legged creature.

Was it a tough sell?

It was hard to sell to retailers and wholesalers. Even high-end shops that carried tempeh complained they wouldn't be able to sell Tofurky because it cost \$30. They even thought the name was too eccentric. But once it made it onto shelves, it sold.

What was the response like from customers?

We put feedback cards on the Tofurky and got a lot of them back. Customers would say "this is the product we've been waiting years for" and "we no longer feel like second-class citizens at the dinner table."

How did you promote your brand?

We didn't have any budget for advertising at first. But Tofurky was a lighting-rod product for comedians. I'd pick up the Sunday paper and see "do you want dark tofu or light?" You can't put a price on that kind of attention. Now, though, we do more traditional advertising.

Are the holidays typically your busiest time?

We used to live and die on the holidays. Now holiday sales are about 18%. We sell Tofurky year round.

How's that ham substitute coming along?

You can get smoky and sweet pretty easily. But that certain je ne sais quoi hamness is elusive.