

EXECUTIVE PROFILE

Smulders hits right tune with health-conscious consumers



HBJ PHOTO | JOHN STEARNS

Michael Smulders traded in ambitions to play in an orchestra to run one of the state's fastest-growing natural foods companies.

JOHN STEARNS

Michael Smulders studied music and envisioned playing in an orchestra percussion section. Instead, he conducts a natural foods company on a rapid growth trajectory.

He expresses his creativity not in making music — although he and his music teacher wife, Melodie, play when they can — but in creating healthy food products.

Smulders, 51, is founder and president of Bakery on Main, which makes certified gluten-free, non-

genetically modified, and kosher foods that include granola, instant oatmeal, granola bars and fruit and nut bars. New products include a Nut Crunch snack and Happy Oats, a gluten-free product for use in oatmeal and baking.

"Operating a small business is something that I believe really feels like a creative endeavor to me," Smulders said. "That's where my passion is."

The company targets a general consumer base but aims to provide a healthy option for people with allergies. Revenues have grown about 30 to 50 percent annually since 2006 and the company expanded into a \$10 million, 111,000-square-foot facility in East Hartford in December.

Around 2000, Smulders began experimenting with gluten-free products at his small Glastonbury natural foods market, which he opened in 1992. He saw a need for wheat-free and then gluten-free baked products and made items like cakes, pies, cookies and brownies, plus carried gluten-free package products. Gluten-free items it shipped in were limited, and taste and nutritional quality were so-so, he said.

"We kind of just set out to say, 'OK, we're going to make these products taste better, and we're going to improve the nutrition panel,'" Smulders said. By 2003, "it started to become apparent that there was a big need and that we could take these products out of the store," and Bakery on Main was founded.

Needing more room to bake and meet demand, Smulders rented space in a Glastonbury bakery from 2004 to 2007 before moving into a 33,000-square-foot facility at 375 Park Ave. in East Hartford. That plant hit its capacity in 2011, he said.

Smulders spent 2½ years getting his current facility, at 127 Park Ave., designed, upgraded and outfitted.



Michael Smulders

Founder and president, Bakery on Main

Highest Education: Bachelor's in music performance, University of Connecticut, 1986.

Executive insights:

"It's very tempting in any business to focus too much on either competition or other things that are going on in the marketplace, or getting boxed in with too much trend analysis or too much research, when true disruptive innovation kind of is independent of that. You need to get yourself in a mindset where you can truly come up with something innovative."

He expanded in an enterprise zone, converting an existing warehouse into a modern plant. The state Department of Economic and Community Development provided a \$3 million, 10-year loan at 2 percent interest to help Bakery On Main make improvements and purchase state-of-the-art machinery and baking equipment. The deal includes hiring provisions: The plant employs about 85 full-time people but expects to approach 100 this year and employ 150 to 175 in three years.

"One of my primary things that I work on every day is continuing to grow our expertise, the really high achieving, quality individuals who want to be part of a creative, fast-growing environment," said Smulders, whom the U.S. Small Business Administration named the 2015 Connecticut Small Business Person of the Year.

In hindsight, Smulders said he would have acted sooner to hire additional expertise to make the business ramp-up smoother. The company has done well innovating and staying true to its mission but must market smarter as food giants like Kellogg and General Mills aggressively enter the natural foods scene, he said.

More competitive marketing and distribution power makes it harder for smaller players to maintain shelf space, he said.

Bakery on Main's products are found in stores like Stop & Shop, Big Y and Whole Foods. They're distributed throughout North America and in Europe, just entered Japan and will enter Australia in September. Smulders' Garden of Light health food store in Avon also sells Bakery on Main products and serves as a testing ground for new items, he said.

Ron Yazmer, an accountant at Case, Corrado, Yazmer & Co. P.C. in East Hartford, praised Smulders' business acumen, forward thinking and treatment of employees. The company's growth pace has been impressive, and Smulders isn't done, Yazmer said.

"You would have no idea that he's running a business of that size," Yazmer said. "He's down to earth. He just fits in with the common man."