

THE TOP

10

INNOVATORS



Shining Stars

"When it gets dark enough you can see the stars."

— Dr. Lee Salk

The last year and a half has been one of the manufacturing industry's darkest nights, and the food industry did not escape it. Layoffs, plant shutdowns and declining sales dominated headlines, while consumers clamoured for deep price reductions and greater value for their money and their loyalty.

But as many business entrepreneurs have said before, adversity and opportunity often go hand in hand, especially for those with the imagination, the ideas and the determination to see them through. That's why many of this year's group of Top 10 Innovators said 2008 and 2009 were banner years for them, and why many of them launched new products or grew their businesses during that time.

While this year's innovators represent a range of different food sectors, they all cater to the needs of niche markets either through healthy and nutritious offerings, or through specialty treats and little indulgences – both trends that recession-weary consumers continue to seek out. Anticipating those needs, and meeting them with unique, high-quality products, has so far brought these entrepreneurs success. And in troubled times, that takes a lot of vision.

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COOKIN' GREENS TORONTO, ONT.

Why Davidson had a swarm of people around her recently. She was doing a demo of her products at a supermarket and had piqued a lot of consumers' interest. And no, she wasn't sampling something savoury or chocolaty. Instead, she was sampling sautéed dark leafy greens. And consumers, it seems, couldn't get enough. In two days she sold 400 units.

Davidson's company is Toronto-based Cookin' Greens – a company whose products resonate with time-strapped, health-conscious consumers. Those products include dark leafy greens that are farm picked and within six hours are washed, blanched and quick-frozen. They include Chopped Kale, Chopped Rapini, Chopped Spinach and the Designer's Mix, which includes spinach, collards, rapini, yellow beans and onion. Each 500-g bag retails for about \$4.99.

Davidson says her products are innovative because it's really a whole new category in Canada. Her products aren't frozen blocks of greens that must be drained and strained before use, but can go right from freezer to recipe. The greens also meet the needs of today's consumers looking for products that combine health and convenience. "It's really a no-brainer," says Davidson. "People look at me and say, 'Why didn't somebody think of this before! I've been cleaning my greens for the last 10 years. I don't have to do that anymore.'"

The idea for the product came to Davidson through her work with her own company Concept to Shelf, a management-consulting firm that helps small- to medium-size food companies with every phase and aspect of new product development. She saw frozen greens in the U.S. and felt it was a strong enough concept to develop here. So after a couple of years and market research, Davidson and her team launched Cookin' Greens in March 2009. The product is now in more than 350 retailers across Canada, and new mixes are launching this fall.

The challenge for Davidson has been raising consumer awareness about the benefits of flash freezing, as well as getting the word out about Cookin' Greens. Right now, consumers "go to the supermarket and stare at kale and walk away because they don't know what to do with it," she says. "We have to get them to understand that kale is now washed, chopped and ready to go. And it's in the frozen vegetable aisle."

— Deanna Rossini

SWEET SUSHI TORONTO, ONT.

It's always inspirational to hear of someone whose work involves a passion and a hobby. In Jessica Schwartz's case, her new venture combines her love of sushi and her lifelong weakness for candy and sweets.

Although Schwartz officially launched Sweet Sushi in January 2009, this was after years of making the treats and bringing them to parties – and after years of improving on the original product. "When I brought them to parties people just thought they were amazing," she says.

The positive response from friends and family gave her the push to turn her hobby into a business, and she turned to the social media site Facebook to promote it. Her Sweet Sushi Facebook page has several hundred followers and most of her sales throughout the first year came through the site and word of mouth. She's even shipped her creations overseas. "It's just exploded since then," she says.

A recent culinary school graduate, Schwartz says she and her mom, Lin, bonded over food and cooking. In fact, Sweet Sushi is very much a family affair, run out of Schwartz' home with her mom and sister Jaclyn helping out. But it was those early experiences with her mom that inspired her to enter the food industry. "I wanted to expand my knowledge and be the best cook that I could be," she says. "And then I fell in love with sweets and pastries and decided that candy is definitely something I wouldn't mind working with."

Her first sweet-sushi creation was the Rainbow Roll, a combination of pulled rice cereal, marshmallows, fruit leather and gummies. Today her creations include a Dragon Roll, with molten chocolate; a Dynamite Roll, with chocolate and cherry pop rocks that "explode" in your mouth; Sweet Sushi pieces, with pulled rice cereal, molten chocolate and fruit leather; and Coco Maki. Her creations, which are nut-free but not made in a nut-free facility, range from 21 to 49 calories and are less than one gram of fat per piece.

The sushi pieces come in trays, selling for \$30 for 35 extra-small pieces, all the way up to \$80 for 100 extra-large pieces. Schwartz's products are currently found at Toronto-area retailers Kiva's, ChocoLicks and The Designer Cookie, and the entrepreneur is hoping to break into grocery chains soon.

— Deanna Rossini

