

Soy-bread makers have healthful hopes

Heart-friendly loaves must find investors, customers

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Sure, it looks like a loaf of bread — but technically, it's not.

The \$3.69 loaf hardly resembles what it cost to produce: about \$100,000.

But Healthyhearth is something unusual. It's a soy-rich product created by Yael Vodovotz, an Ohio State University food scientist, and Cory Ballard, a student and president of Bavoy Inc., a company launched two years ago to market Healthyhearth.

Soy bread isn't new, but the amount of soy baked into this loaf is unusual: 52.5 percent of a 2-pound loaf of Healthyhearth is soy.

After a little more than a month on the market, more than 190 loaves have been sold at the two Columbus-area Andersons stores.

The dreams, however, are much bigger. The company hopes to find investors so the product can be distributed nationally.

"A lot of times, new products . . . take a lot more effort for us to fill and for it to take off, but (Healthyhearth) just seemed to take off on its own," said Cindy Armentrout, a bakery manager at the Andersons store on Bent Tree Boulevard on the Northwest Side.

The product and its beginnings show the complicated and sometimes costly routes that new products must take before reaching the marketplace.

The soy-bread makers hope their product makes it as "an easy lifestyle choice," Vodovotz said.

With 6.25 grams of soy protein per serving, the bread can claim to be what the Food and Drug Administration deems "heart-healthy." According to the FDA, 25 grams of soy protein a day might reduce the risk of heart disease.

Soy contains chemicals called isoflavones, which have been linked to lowering cholesterol, reducing the risk of heart disease, breast and prostate cancers and bone deterioration. Some studies, however, suggest soy could stimulate the growth of estrogen-dependent tumors or impair cognitive function, said OSU nutritionist Jaime Ackerman.

Researchers have yet to show whether the soy, once put into bread, will yield similar results.

Soy bread also stays fresh longer than other breads, with a shelf life of two weeks or more.

Before Bavoy sells the soybread technology to investors, the company has been testing it in the Columbus area.

All six Andersons stores in Ohio want to stock it, but the cash-strapped producer can't meet demand.



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Cory Ballard, left, and Yael Vodovotz have come up with a 2-pound loaf of bread that is more than half soy.



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Ray Darst slides a loaf of Healthyhearth soy bread into the oven at Stan Evans Bakery in Grandview Heights. The bread is being sold at two Andersons stores in central Ohio.

"It's really frustrating," Ballard said. "It's a big idea, and we're taking baby steps."

The company needs about \$400,000 to fulfill its first-stage goal of supplying the Andersons stores and a major chain, Ballard said. He also would like to see Giant Eagle, Kroger or Wild Oats carry Healthyhearth.

Working with the Business Technology Center and the Columbus Venture Network, Ballard is trying to publicize his product, seek funding and build the brand. It cost about \$100,000, from research to development, to create one loaf of the bread.

Interest in the bread is rising.

"They understand the market, what they need to do next — but it's still very early," said Jonathan York, a general partner with Reservoir Venture Partners in Columbus, an investment firm recently invited to a presentation by Bavoy.

"One of the good things with Bavoy is . . . they're playing into a national trend by moving into healthy foods," said Tony Dennis, president of Omeris, which was one of the first to invest in Bavoy. "They're in a sweet spot."

If the company can draw more investors and license its technology, it could see its first profits by 2006, Bavoy estimates.

Because most people don't expect soy to taste good, Ballard said the company put taste and texture at the top of its goals.

First baked in a bread machine in the basement of Vivian Hall on Ohio State's campus, Healthyhearth is now baked by Stan Evans Bakery in Grandview Heights.

Bakers spent two months perfecting the process before making the bread for Andersons.

Stan Evans is working with Bavoy on other ideas to increase the Healthyhearth line, including crackers and pizza dough.

"They had the knowledge, the formula," Evans said, "but they didn't know the baking."

Because the company can't afford to hire people to deliver the bread, Ballard picks it up and drives it to Andersons.

"It's worth a try for people who want to get more soy in their diet," said Steve Clinton, who is researching the bread at the James Cancer Hospital.

"This gives them a way to have it without them having to view it as a medicine or a pill."

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How it's made

Recipe for a batch of soy loaves:

1. Measure 93 pounds of ingredients and mix.
2. Portion the dough by weight.
3. Flatten the dough, rolling it into a log shape.
4. Put the dough into bread pans.
5. Put the pans into the "proof box," a high-heat, high-humidity environment.
6. Put the loaves in the oven. Bake for about an hour.
7. Cool loaves in front of a fan for three hours.
8. Cut into half-inch slices. Package and distribute.

Total time: 6½ hours

Number of loaves: 40

Source: Mike Rofengarten, Stan Evans Bakery