

Refrigerated Foods Report: Corporate Profile

Fun in a box

Norwegian Jake's brings a light-hearted approach to refrigerated grab-and-go meals.

By Carolyn Chapin

It may sound counterintuitive but Norwegian Jake's CEO Mike Skinner says, in many ways, it was a kid's meal that helped this Warren, Mich., company grow up.

"We've matured. We understand now more what we want to be when we grow up," says Skinner, who has been involved in this refrigerated business since its 2001 start.

Back then, Skinner partnered with Chad Jacobson (the name behind Norwegian Jake's), an outdoor enthusiast with an idea for portable camping meals in a paperboard can. It quickly became clear, however, that the camping meals were too niche-y and Skinner decided it was time to come up with a new business plan.

"We ended up buying [Jacobson's] share out and we started looking more at the retail model and seeing what we could do," Skinner says.

In 2002, Skinner and a new team started talking to supermarkets and convenience stores about a new line of refrigerated meals – called LunchBoxers – in resealable tubs. Since then, Skinner has networked with co-packers to provide meal components such as flatbread wraps, lunch meats, cheeses, hummus, condiments, candy bars, pretzels and more.

"The idea was really taking our products out there and making them more convenient and healthier for people to eat. That was our goal," Skinner says. "We use very lean sliced ham and turkey. We try to find quality, healthier food that we can put in the kits. And part of our target is a lot of moms who might be picking up a lunch for their kids and they want something to take for them too."

LunchBoxers' success has led Norwegian Jake's to look at other opportunities as well. "We just came out with kid's meals, that we're calling DinoLunches." Skinner says. "We've worked on them for two-and-a-half years and we've seen significant growth in that area."

Sales from the kid's meals, as well as another growing venture, private label, have Skinner aiming for more than \$10 million in sales this year.

"I really think the [grab-and-go meal] category has



A line of dinosaur-themed meals for kids is the latest convenience meal concept from Norwegian Jake's.

changed in letting some newer brands step in," he says. "The category managers were sticking with the large brand name companies, and I think there's been some innovation in thinking both at the category manager level and at the consumer level."

Since launching its private label program two years ago, Norwegian Jake's already has made a name for itself. The company, which counts H-E-B, Meijer and Aldi Foods stores among its private label partners, has the ability to create brand new store-brand products or to place existing logos and brand names on products. This year, Skinner says, Norwegian Jake's will focus even more on this aspect of the business.

"We went into private label because we wanted to keep our overhead low and a lot of the stores are starting to bring in their own brands," he says. "There's an opportunity for us to come in and provide a better price point for the consumer."

By the end of the year, Skinner expects 70 percent of Norwegian Jake's business will be in the private label sector. He also feels confident that the DinoLunches will take off.

"We play with a lot of billion dollar companies. And I think we've made a niche in a marketplace by providing quality food at a reasonable price, and we're growing," he says.

And despite the company's grown up outlook, there's still a hint of child-like glee in Skinner's ultimate goal, "I want to make some money, have some fun and 'Do Good Things'.

Life is short." **RFF**

Who are they? NORWEGIAN JAKE'S

Location: Warren, Mich.

Execs: Mike Skinner, CEO; Vic Ventimiglia, sales executive

Products: 16 SKUs of portable meals including refrigerated LunchBoxers and DinoMeals, and shelf-stable SnakPacks

Distribution: Mostly east of the Rocky Mountains

Channels: Retail, private label, government

Web site: www.norwegianjakes.com



Mike Skinner