

Birch Benders to compete with conventional brands

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At Natural Products Expo East, Birch Benders introduced a new line of 24-oz mixes in original, buttermilk, chocolate chip, six-grain and protein.

BALTIMORE — Birch Benders, a Denver-based maker of premium pancake mixes, is taking on Aunt Jemima, Bisquick, Krusteaz and other conventional brands with the introduction of larger packaging at a competitive price point for grocery stores.



Matt LaCasse, co-founder and c.e.o. of Birch Benders

“These old brands that have been around forever have had very little innovation, so we think we can steal customers away from them by offering better quality ingredients, better tasting recipes, more convenience, at a very similar price point,” said Matt LaCasse, co-founder and chief executive officer of Birch Benders.

“Our goal is to steal a lot of those

customers away and focus on dominating the pancake category before moving on to other baking mixes.”

Founded in 2012, Birch Benders has established a firm foothold in natural retailers, generating strong triple-digit or quadruple-digit growth in the past three years. The company offers nine organic varieties of pancake and waffle mixes, including classic, protein, gluten-free, paleo, chocolate chip, six-grain cinnamon, pumpkin spice, gingerbread spice and double chocolate peppermint.

At Natural Products Expo East, held Sept. 21-24 in Baltimore, Birch Benders introduced a new line of 24-oz mixes in original, buttermilk, chocolate chip, six-grain and protein.



Birch Benders offers organic varieties of pancake and waffle mixes in such varieties as gluten-free, gingerbread spice and double chocolate peppermint.

“As we’ve been growing and expanding, we’ve gotten a lot of ACV (all-commodity volume) around natural, and we’ve been trying to grow even further to break into the conventional market,” Mr. LaCasse told *Food Business News*. “What we’re finding, though, is our prices are competitive in natural, but they’re definitely on the higher end in the grocery spectrum. We use only the finest premium, organic and natural ingredients, and what we wanted to do was make a more price-friendly product that would be more acceptable to the conventional grocery consumer. Instead of using organic ingredients, we’re using Non-GMO Project verified ingredients, and that has reduced our cost enough so that we can offer a price pack architecture, a new pancake offering that’s only a 50c trade-up from an Aunt Jemima, for example. It will sell for \$3.99 for 24-oz.”

Today, Birch Benders products are sold in approximately 4,500 retail outlets, including Target, where the brand has offered exclusive items, including, most recently, a sweet potato pancake mix. Previously, the brand developed a paleo pancake mix to sell exclusively at Whole Foods Market.



Birch Benders offered a sweet potato pancake mix exclusively at Target and a paleo pancake mix exclusively at Whole Foods Market.

“Coming up with ideas can take any amount of time,” Mr. LaCasse said. “It’s a lot easier when you partner with a retailer because you already have the distribution in place. So, say we partner with a retailer to make our sweet potato pancake mix or our paleo pancake mix. What we do then is we hit the internet, open up all the cookbooks, look at what pancake mix and gourmet recipes there already are out there. And then my wife (co-founder and chief operating officer Lizzi Ackerman) and I sit down in our kitchen, sort through a bunch of ingredients and start whipping up pancakes.

“We’ve been making pancake recipes since 2011 on an industrial scale, so we’ve gotten pretty good at knowing what blends work together well and what won’t work together well. With sweet potato, we started with our classic recipe blend and then altered it by adding different spices and sweet potato flour. We have an Excel spreadsheet open and record every recipe we do. We want to make it so the flavor is perfectly balanced, the moisture content is right... It can take a couple attempts to upwards of 100 attempts. Our paleo took 99 attempts, whereas the sweet potato pancake took around 10.”

In the early days, product testing and in-store demos helped Mr. LaCasse and Ms. Ackerman build a successful business.



Birch Benders plans to continue focusing on pancake and waffle mixes.

"I think that was the most important part about our start-up, just getting out there and testing it and seeing what people want and like, and once you hit that traction, that's when you can put your foot to the pedal," Mr. LaCasse said. "Unless you really have that product market fit, putting your foot to the pedal will just result in a lot of wasted dollars."

For now, the company will continue to focus on pancake and waffle mixes, where Mr. LaCasse sees very little innovation and "so much runway."

"Obviously, the on-the-go breakfast trend is really hot and really great," Mr. LaCasse said, "but we think that people will never really leave the breakfast table completely."