

Vegetarians, Meat-Eaters Dig In To Send Sales of Tofurky Soaring

By Ylan Q. Mui
Washington Post Staff Writer
Saturday, November 17, 2007; D01

Seth Tibbott was just an ordinary hippie living in a treehouse when inspiration struck.

The year was 1986, and Tibbott had hoped for six years that his small business selling vegetarian meat alternatives in rural Washington state would catch on. Success proved elusive -- the treehouse was the only place he could afford to live -- until he developed a soy-based version of the traditional Thanksgiving turkey. He called it Tofurky.

"It's a name that resonates with consumers," said Tibbott, who grew up in [Chevy Chase](#). "We're fine with the fact they think it's funny or they get a smile out of it. You remember jokes."

Tofurky hit store shelves in 1995, and the meatless dish has become a cultural phenomenon, even showing up on the TV shows "Jeopardy" and "The O.C." Tibbott's company, Turtle Island Foods of Hood, Ore., has annual revenue of \$11 million. Tofurky sales have grown 37 percent this year from 2006. He expects to sell 270,000 Tofurkys by the end of the holiday season, which translates to 438,000 pounds of tofu, wheat protein, canola oil and spices.

The concept was born of Tibbott's vegetarian frustrations. After attending [Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School](#), he left for college in [Ohio](#) in 1969 and returned home having sworn off meat. Thanksgiving was particularly tough, he said, recalling a nasty bout with a stuffed pumpkin and a rock-hard gluten roast.

"We were looking for something for an answer and we figured there's probably other people out there," he said.

A 2006 poll conducted by [Harris Interactive](#) for the nonprofit Vegetarian Resource Group found that about 2 percent of adults are vegetarian, meaning they do not eat meat, poultry or seafood. The total was up from about 1 percent from a similar study the group conducted in 1994. The percentage of adults who do not eat poultry in particular grew to 6 percent from 3 percent.

The market, meanwhile, has been helped by omnivores who seek alternatives to meat for health reasons. They helped turn vegetarian foods into a \$1.2 billion industry last year, up 44 percent from 2001, the consumer research firm Mintel said. The report found that 23 percent of non-vegetarians eat meat alternatives, though consumers still say the products cannot match the real thing.

John Cunningham, consumer research manager at the Vegetarian Resource Group, which has received donations from Tibbott's company, acknowledged that Tofurky does not taste like turkey. That doesn't mean it doesn't taste good, with a firm texture and a salty, savory flavor. It just tastes different.

"It can take the place of a big piece of meat," he said. "People are feeling a little bit neglected because all they get to eat are side dishes" during the holidays.

Tibbott started Turtle Island Foods in 1980 with \$2,500 in savings and later with investments of \$5,000 from his mother and \$17,000 from his older brother, Bob, who lives in Chevy Chase. Originally, Tibbott peddled a product called tempeh, which is made from fermented soybeans. He started making 100 pounds of tempeh after hours in the cafe of a cooperative in [Oregon](#), then delivering it to clients in [Portland](#) overnight.

Two years later, he moved the shoestring operation to an abandoned elementary school in a small logging town in the Cascade Mountains. The building had no heat, but it was near a scenic river and about a mile from Tibbott's treehouse. It was cheaper than renting an apartment, and he could not afford much else. The treehouse was not quite as primitive as it sounds -- there was electricity and phone service. At night, flying squirrels passed by his window.

Tibbott lived there for seven years before marrying and moving in with his wife, Suzanne, who lived in a more traditional apartment. When Tofurky hit, the treehouse days were gone for good.

Tibbott had seen a similar name used informally on other products, but he shortened it to have the same number of letters as a telephone number and had it trademarked. The first version of Tofurky, made from soy milk, was a mammoth affair with eight tempeh drumsticks. Tibbott said he had visions of families giving thanks over a large Tofurky, only to realize that just a few people at any gathering were likely to eat it. The latest version serves three or four people, and the drumsticks were replaced by cranberry apple potato dumplings.

The quirky product slowly gained notice. In 2000, it was mentioned in an episode of the TV show "The X-Files." A year later, Tofurky was a question on the game show "Jeopardy." (No one got the correct answer.) The comedian [Ellen DeGeneres](#) brought up Tofurky on her show in 2003 and drew laughs from the audience.

"People don't believe me," she said. "There is a Tofurky."

Though Tofurky has attracted the most attention, Tibbott's company makes a range of faux meats. In fact, its best-selling products are vegetarian sausage and hickory-smoked deli slices. The Thanksgiving Tofurky roasts rank fifth in popularity and make up about 17 percent of the company's revenue.

Despite the industry's rapid growth, mainstream appeal may be limited. Harry Balzer, vice president at consumer behavior research firm [NPD Group](#), said that less than 1 percent of households will be putting a meat alternative on their table this Thanksgiving. The National Turkey Federation estimates that 88 percent of Americans will eat turkey Thursday, adding up to 46 million gobblers, the most of any holiday.

"Clearly," Balzer said, "it's a strong tradition."