

Scharf projects lentil product will be big hit in North America

By James Parker
for agWORLD

The maker of the E-Zeewrap plastic wrap dispenser is poised to make another splash in the business world, this time with a food product.

Jim Scharf of Perdue hopes to have Nona's Instant Lentils on sale throughout North America within the next few months. The affable entrepreneur expects the convenience product to move off the shelves in rapid fashion.

"This could be bigger than E-Zeewrap," Scharf said in a recent interview.

"I think the product inside the package is good and the packaging is second to none. So two key things hopefully cause it to walk off the shelves."

Earlier this decade Scharf hit it big with E-Zeewrap, a plastic dispenser that takes the pain out of using plastic wrap. Advertised on TV and sold mainly in Canada and the United States, the product has been very good to Jim Scharf Holdings, with gross sales of about \$5 million annually.

In 1995, the company was listed in Profit: The Magazine for Canadian Entrepreneurs as one of the fastest growing firms in Canada. The company also markets specialty knives and an odor absorber.

If Scharf had decided to rest on his laurels for the rest of his life after scoring big with E-Zeewrap, few would have blamed him.

After all, the man has a huge farm to manage, a 45-section grain and specialty crop operation just outside Perdue, a village located about 100 kilometres west of Saskatoon.

But business ideas have a way of entering Scharf's head. The inspiration for this one was located in a field outside the farm house. Like many Saskatchewan farmers, Scharf grows lentils.

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Scharf said he has long mused about finding a better way to sell lentils to the masses. Although growing in popularity, particularly among the health conscious, the legume has yet to become standard fare in Canadian households.

One reason for the limited demand is the 45 to 60 minutes it takes to cook lentils on the stove. To cut the cooking time, Scharf has the lentils exposed to infrared energy.

The idea of instant lentils was first suggested to Scharf by the late Raj Manek, the province's regional director of economic development in Saskatoon.

"He was a very good friend of mine and we talked all the time," said Scharf.

"He said what about instant lentils. Like instant rice. The light bulb went on. That threw me into gear and I did what I do best — bring a product to market."

Scharf said he and his wife, Bruna, have spent more than two years and in excess of \$100,000 developing the product. Much of the time and money was spent on designing the packaging.

A 12-ounce container of lentils, which cooks in 14 minutes, is sold in a small plastic package that can be resealed. A picture of

Bruna's grandmother adorns the container. Nona means grandmother in Italian.

Scharf said he expects the product will be distributed in two packages. One will be sent to markets familiar with lentils, such as the southern United States, which has a large Hispanic population. The other will go to places where lentils aren't particularly popular. It will include spices and recipes developed by a Vancouver chef.

"Health conscious people eat lentils," said Scharf.

"People like me don't know what they are. Hopefully this product will open up the North American market. North America is an instant society. We hope to increase North American consumption of lentils and increase lentil production in Canada."

Bruna Scharf has tested the lentil recipes on the workers at E-Zeewrap. They received a positive response.

A tougher, perhaps more discriminating group of eaters awaits, however. Representatives from major supermarket chains must be convinced to carry the product. And they will want results if they put in an order.

"The hard part is getting it to walk off the shelf," said Scharf.

"Anybody can sell something to someone. But it's got to be a proven product if they (the stores) are going to buy again."



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