

Family works to promote Wisconsin snack

By Danielle Begalke

Staff Writer

MERRILL — Scott "Scooter" Hare just wanted some good jerky to take on his business trips and outdoor expeditions.

An avid hunter and fisherman, he tired of buying the typical "bag of air" jerky that abounds on many convenience store shelves. Frequent hours traveling left him yearning for a quick and easy snack for the road.

Five years ago, he started making venison meat snacks at his Belleville home. He received help from his wife, Lisa, and stepdaughters Olivia Ace, 16, and Abbey Ace, 18. He shared his snacks while traveling throughout the world for business.

Mr. Hare never planned to start his own brand of jerky, but soon phone calls started flooding in. People wanted his meat snacks, and, unintentionally, Wild Hare Brand Premium Beef Snacks was born.

The business began with Mr. Hare marketing them by word of mouth. Two years ago he quit his job of 28 years and formed Wild Hare Foods.

The meat snacks have been steadily increasing in popularity through-

out Wisconsin and the Midwest. The company has grown to include the use of four private label manufacturers based in Wisconsin, one in Illinois and about a dozen distributors throughout the Midwest.

Customer satisfaction is at the top of Mr. Hare's priority list.

"We're small enough that we can provide wonderful customer service," he said, "and from a customer satisfaction standpoint, customers tell us

that we have superior quality and flavor."

True to his outdoorsman roots, the jerky is packed in a vacuum-sealed, earth-friendly package he said makes it the perfect pocket-size snack to carry.

Its vibrant and highly visible orange packaging promotes hunters' safety, Mr. Hare joked.

Best of all, Mr. Hare said, the product is made in the heart of the beef-snack industry.

"We are locally owned, locally developed and use local beef that comes out of the state and Midwest,"

he said. Wild Hare products, which have expanded to include beef jerky, beef sticks, pork sticks and summer sausage, are all part of the Something

Supplier takes honors at state competition

MERRILL — Andy Geiss is carrying on a family tradition.

He represents the third generation of his family to own and operate Geiss Meat Service in Merrill.

Last spring, he leaned on the tradition and entered one of his private label products, Wild Hare Brand premium jerky, in the Wisconsin Meat Product Show in Middleton. The product won grand champion honors in the whole muscle jerky category. At the same show, another Geiss product, a mettwurst, received a reserve champion award.

"Some of our other products have placed real well, too," Mr. Geiss said.

Geiss Meat Service was established in 1956, by his grandparents, Ed and Marcelle Geiss.

Mr. Geiss started working at the family business when he was 10 years old, cleaning up and taking out the garbage. By the time he was 18, he began working in the process room. He later worked as manager.

In 2005, at the age of 26, he took over the business from his parents, John and Sherry Geiss, and his aunt and uncle, Val and Gary Schlueter.

The business is still largely family-operated, with 15 employees — eight of which are family members.

Among Mr. Geiss's first improvements to the business was the adding a 5,000 square foot federally certified sausage kitchen.

The federal certification allowed him to ship products nationally, which opened the door to private labeling.

While he'll soon be hard at work processing the 500 to 600 deer that come flooding in during hunting season, he'll find some time to perfect his recipe for next year's competition.

"That's what I enjoy doing," he said, "I like to create new recipes and make something that people are looking for."

— Danielle Begalke

Special from Wisconsin program, a trademark marketing program created by the Wisconsin Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection. To be certified as Something Special from Wisconsin, at least 50 percent of a product's ingredients, production or processing activities must be from Wisconsin.

In spring, another milestone was reached when Andy Geiss of Geiss Meat Service in Merrill entered Mr. Hare's jerky in the statewide Wisconsin Meat Product Show in Middleton. Mr. Geiss is one of the four manufacturers producing Wild Hare meat snacks.

The recipe took grand champion honors in the whole muscle jerky category at the show, which is the largest of its kind in the nation.

A judging panel of over 40 food scientists, out-of-state meat processors and other food industry professionals scored the jerky, based on its internal and external appearance, taste and aroma.

For now, Mr. Hare is focused on promoting his snack meat products throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest. Goals involve gradual sales growth in specific areas of the East Coast and Southeast, the Southwest, and eventually nationally.

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