

Past Austin Federation Director SERVES UP KOSHER FOR PASSOVER BREAKFAST

By Tonyia Cone

Passover breakfast cereals may have a bad rap, but not for long, thanks to Wayne Silverman and his company, Foodman LLC.

Silverman started making oat-based granola -- and Matzolah, the marriage of matzo and granola, for Passover -- about 40 years ago when he was a Michigan State University student.

Over the years, Silverman sent granola and Matzolah to friends and family, who encouraged him to start making it commercially so he could share it with the world.

"People said, 'Passover is such a trial, a tribulation for good tasting foods, especially breakfast foods,'" Silverman explained.

Silverman served as the Jewish Federation of Austin's executive director from 1989 to 1995 before moving on to 12 years as chief administrative officer of the Austin-based American Botanical Council (ABC), where he learned the ins and outs of the natural product movement.

The experience gave Silverman the impetus to do a yearlong test run of Matzolah, a high-end maple nut flavored granola made with vanilla, coconut, almonds, walnuts, pecans, raisins, Vermont maple syrup and matzo instead of oats.

Marketed as "the trail mix of the Exodus," Matzolah is a high-fiber, natural snack and breakfast cereal.

With a crunchy texture, it can be eaten on its own and stands up to milk without instantly becoming soggy.

Silverman explained that the product stands out from other granolas and will be successful year-round because of its status as a Jewish ethnic food and because of its nutritional value, flavor and mouth feel.

"We are growing in large part by feedback from people that say, 'This isn't just for Passover, I want this now,'" he said.

In 2003, Silverman, along with his wife and daughter, made 1,000 boxes of Matzolah in a kitchen at the ABC.

Ephraim Brock, now manager of the H-E-B Kosher Store, served as their mashgiach (kosher supervisor).

The experiment was wildly successful. The Matzolah

sold in Austin-area H-E-B stores and Seattle Albertsons. People also bought the Passover granola from the Silvermans directly and online.

In the end, Safeway wanted 10,000 boxes of Matzolah. Overwhelmed, the Silvermans said they could not do it.

Silverman said, "The thought of giving it up, giving everything up, was scary."

They registered the name Matzolah and the company's name, Foodman, and just let it lie.

The Silvermans moved to Atlanta in 2007, where Wayne Silverman became the executive director of the Hillels of Georgia.

Through his nonprofit work, he had gained experience building projects from scratch, and still wanted to embark on his own business.

"I love food, I love creating things, and the response was always so great to it," Silverman explained.

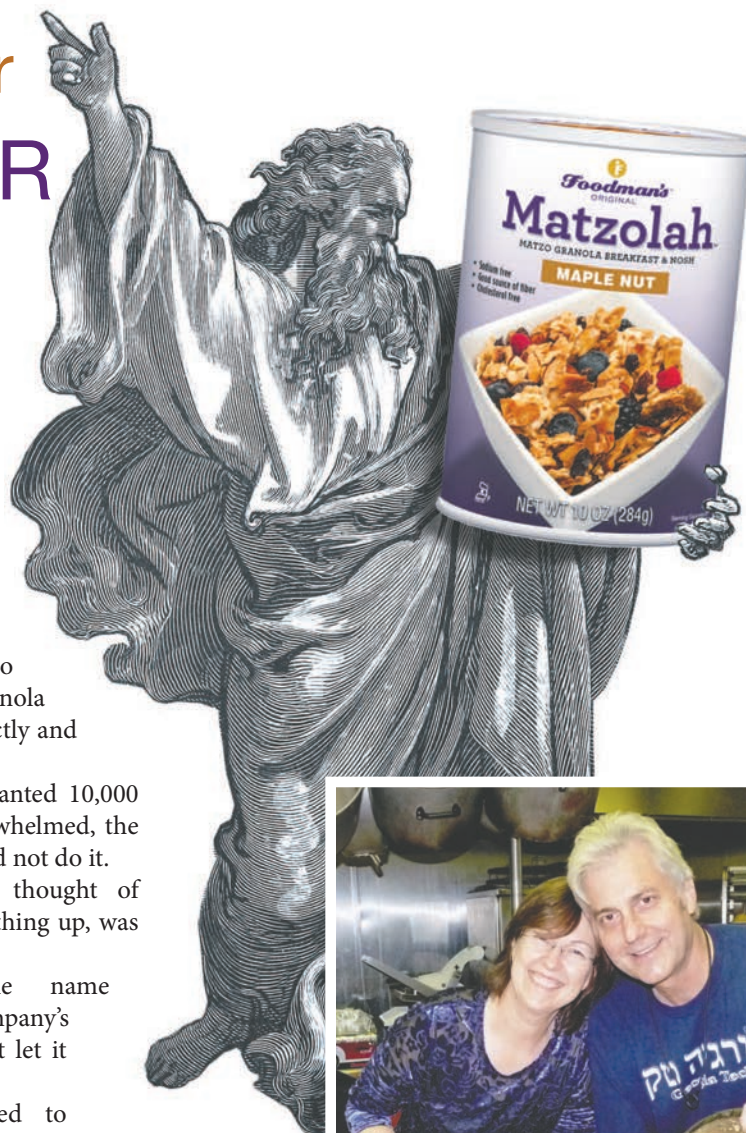
Last May, he left his position with Hillel to resurrect Foodman and Matzolah.

The Silvermans got together with Dyana Furmansky, Silverman's college friend and now Foodman's marketing and public relations manager, and his old college roommate, Scott Gantwerker, who built a career as a foods research and development executive with Quaker Oats, Pepperidge Farm and Pepsi-Cola.

Now Foodman's executive vice president, Gantwerker explained that he always believed he could go beyond a technical, scientific role and be an innovator on the business side as well.

When Wayne Silverman approached him about partnering with him to bring Matzolah to market, he jumped at the chance.

"It gives us the opportunity to bring contemporary, innovative, delicious and nutritious products to the kosher consumer, an area that has lagged behind and



Laura and Wayne Silverman making Matzolah in the kosher kitchen at the Atlanta JCC.

Credit: Diversified Business Communications

not benefited from recent mainstream food trends, Gantwerker said.

"And, when we are successful, we will have built something that will last - a legacy for others to continue and build upon," Gantwerker said.

The team connected with owners of Aron Streit Inc., makers of Streit's Matzo and the only family-owned and operated matzo company in the United States.

While Foodman's leaders only wanted Streit's to make Matzolah, Streit's wanted to become involved

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in distribution and be part-owners of the company as well. They now jointly own the company.

“It was a recognized name for so long in the business, it kind of gave everything a boost,” Silverman said.

Since then, the Foodman team has had a busy year. Matzolah’s first run of 20 cases was in October. The second production run of 2,000 cases was scheduled later in the month, just ahead of the annual trade show Kosherfest.

Instead, Hurricane Sandy hit, flooding Streit’s Moonachie, N.J., plant where Matzolah was to be made, damaging labels and leaving fish in the parking lot.

Desperate to pull together samples for Kosherfest, the Silvermans made 100 pounds of Matzolah by hand in a kitchen at the Marcus Jewish Community Center of Atlanta.

With Gantwerker coordinating the effort, Streit’s cleaned up enough to make 1,000 cases in time for the show, and the Silvermans headed to Kosherfest with their luggage full of Matzolah in 2,500 snack bags.

After the trade show, where they were named “Best new kosher product for Passover,” they donated the remaining Matzolah to hurricane victims.

This Passover, maple nut flavored Matzolah will be available at some Austin H-E-B stores, and Whole Foods will exclusively carry a whole wheat Matzolah with extra virgin olive oil. Matzolah, hechshered by KOF-K, will cost around six dollars a package.

Silverman expects to sell 60,000 to 70,000 canisters of Matzolah this year. Streit’s will distribute it through grocery stores, and the Foodman team is selling Matzolah directly to Jewish organizations.

Foodman plans to eventually offer cranberry orange and a salty-sweet flavor, gluten-free Matzolah as well as bars and hot breakfast cereal.

Silverman, who misses the social service aspect of working in the nonprofit world, enjoys seeing his vision turn into reality as a small business owner.

“We were like the darlings of Kosherfest, right at the front door. By the time the show was over, everyone had the name Matzolah on his lips. That’s a fun part,” he said.

“It’s something I always wanted to do. I’m at a point in my life where I wanted to give it a try now. And everything seemed to be aligning at the same moment.”




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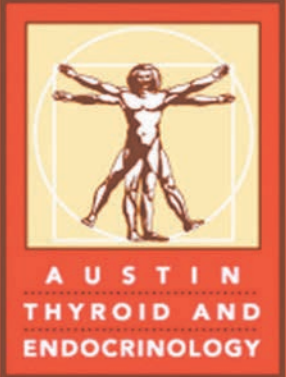
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