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## Sweet taste of success

**Scarborough candy maker taps global markets with organic, kosher and vegan treats**

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**ANNA PIEKARSKI**  
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Southern Ontario's faltering manufacturing industry is leaving a bitter taste for many, but there is one sweet spot of success with a global reach.



AARON HARRIS/TORONTO STAR

Luna Roth started Pure Fun Confections after her daughter questioned whether the sweets she was feeding her grandchildren were healthy.

Scarborough-based specialty candy maker Pure Fun Confections Inc. launched its product in the United States 2 1/2 years ago.

While its organic candy has been available in natural food and specialty stores here for years, the company's sweet treats are just now hitting the shelves of major Canadian retailers including Loblaws stores after meeting recently introduced Canadian labelling requirements.

"We're not looking to make candy, we're looking to launch the Pure Fun brand," says founder and president Luna Roth, who was nominated for the Organization of Women In International Trade's 2008 woman of the year award for her work enhancing the status of women in international business.

As traditional manufacturing jobs disappear in the province, the organic candy maker says she would never consider shifting her operations to another continent to cut production costs. Currently, 25 per cent of the manufacturing is performed in Scarborough, 40 per cent in Hamilton and 40 per cent in the U.S.

Roth attributes Pure Fun's success to its range of organic, kosher and vegan products.

Organic production requires every ingredient – from commercial processing to the land it was grown on – be certified organic.

"For (certified) organic products, they have to know the pedigree of everything," Roth explains.

The factory must retain documents for all ingredients, lot numbers and records of production and manufacturing details. Equipment is sanitized using all-natural solutions to maintain purity. Even the packaging equipment is checked by the certifying agency to insure the integrity of the product.

There is no tolerance for pesticides, insecticides, preservatives, synthetic colours or flavours. For example, beets may be used for colour.

At least 95 per cent of ingredients must carry an individual organic certification from a recognized certifying body. The other allowable 5 per cent of ingredients must be all natural, and even that is only acceptable if there is not a certified organic equivalent. There is an annual organic audit and failure to meet any certifying requirements can result in revocation of organic certification.

To meet these strict standards, Roth and her team spent 2 1/2 years developing the company's treats. Roth was inspired to start the company after her daughter, Amanda, pointed out the candies Roth handed out to her grandchildren could be harmful.

Roth – who was brokering for confectionary companies at the time – turned to the Internet. Surprised by the list of additives and chemicals the sweets contained, she asked candy companies if they would consider changing their products' ingredients.

"When I went to manufacturers and asked them to do it, they said 'candy wasn't supposed to be good for you.' I said, 'yes but it's not supposed to kill you either.'"

So, armed with a 1800s cookbook, her daughter's knowledge of organic

cooking and financing obtained by mortgaging her home, the two set out to create a healthier candy. Eventually sales grew to the point where she took on a few limited partners, many of whom also worked for the company.

Roth said she originally planned to sell the treats in specialty shops, but bigger supermarkets and pharmacies in the U.S. began to take notice and stocked the product on their shelves. While 85 per cent of sales are in the U.S., Pure Fun's candies are also sold in the Middle East and Asia. Distribution deals are currently being finalized in England, Europe and Australia.

The company has 11 full-time employees. As candy is made seasonally, the company uses about 50 to 60 contract staff for manufacturing on an as-needed basis. For example, organic cotton candy cannot be shipped in the warm summer months, as the fluffy candy floss collapses in the heat, so it is only manufactured in colder weather.

Pure Fun is also part of a distributor and broker network that provides access to more than 1,000 commissioned sales representatives.

Revenues have grown by 50 per cent in the past year and with the introduction of new products, the company expects to double its Canadian sales in 2009.

With a growing focus on healthy eating – and sales rising – Roth says people are beginning to take notice of Pure Fun's potential and she is getting offers to help with financing or purchase shares.

"We've had a couple of offers, there has been some interest. But it doesn't make sense. If we wait another year or two, we know where the business is going."

With more than 30 years of experience in the manufacturing industry, Roth says taking the time to create a good product is more important than creating many products.

She says entrepreneurs need a few other key ingredients to be successful. Enthusiasm, passion and intuitiveness are all necessary when starting a business, but so is a team of good people, both employees and outside agencies.

"People need to start looking at what they have and build on their core competencies. They are diluting themselves so much. They aren't sure whether to make energy efficient cars or big cars," she says.

Roth credits Agri-Food Canada and the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food for providing information, direction, and access to global markets. She praises the Bank of Montreal for helping her during the business' early stages.

While creating the business has meant years of work, it is evident when speaking to Roth that making candy is also a lot of fun.

Currently Pure Fun is partnering with a team of chefs and researchers at George Brown College to develop a new gummy candy. It can take more than a year to come up with the right organic recipes and ingredients, but Roth says it is worth the wait.

"When you see it done, when you see them pour the candy into moulds, I just feels so good, to know we did it."