

# Lucia Falek: 30 Years of Innovation in the Food Manufacturing Sector

by Thomas R. Cutler

Lucia Falek is originally from Detroit Michigan. She remembers a childhood excitement and fascination of manufacturing while visiting the Ford Motor Company at the age of six and the Kellogg cereal company at age nine.

Lucia went on to study nutrition for 3 years at Michigan State University before she slowly and eventually realized she preferred to study how to manufacture food instead!

It was at MSU that I met Lucia, and I have followed her career and passion for innovation in the food manufacturing sector.

She graduated from MSU with a degree in Food Science and Technology and spent the next 16 years with The Big Boy Food Group – immersed in the manufacturing of everything from fudge cake, soup, and salad dressing to burger buns, ice cream, and spaghetti sauce.

Big Boy was the ideal place for a young scientist eager to learn a wide variety of processes. It was there she became remarkably familiar with the FDA, the USDA, hundreds of raw ingredients, and hundreds of food service items. By the time Lucia joined Butterball Farms in 2004, she had 20 years of experience in quality, food safety, and R&D.

Butterball Farms is a small Grand Rapids, Michigan company making specialty flavored products for some of the largest companies on earth. Lucia currently finds herself using her experience and her fascination for manufacturing. She works closely with the Butterball Farms' sales team and their customers... continually creating, commercializing, and packaging customized flavored food solutions.

Lucia was recently interviewed on the WAM (Women and Manufacturing) podcast. Watch here.

## **TRCutler: What do you think is most misunderstood about the food industry today?**

Lucia Falek: Innovation is at the heart of why the food industry is dynamic, interesting, and ever-changing. Corporate executives in the food industry must support a culture of food innovation based on the consumers' new buying patterns, product performance expectations, flavor palettes, and increasing desire to experience food differently. During COVID with less restaurant dining, more people stayed home and experimented with food, cooking, and flavors.

## **After more than three decades in the food manufacturing business, what has surprised you most?**

Food science and food safety have advanced significantly through technology. Operational processes have changed a great deal in 30 years. We eventually implemented a continuous process improvement



mentality that migrated from the automotive industry. The result has been a greater focus on food innovation and listening to the demands of customers with respect to product performance, flavor, cooking styles, and supply chain considerations.

### **What has changed most in food manufacturing since COVID?**

What hasn't changed may be more important to consider. Food producers were somewhat prepared to meet COVID-19 challenges due to regulatory compliance and occupational health and safety programs already in place. Establishing new protocols has been part of the industry during my entire career – overall most companies have adapted well.

### **How has the tight labor market impacted the food manufacturing industry?**

Most food manufacturers operate on very tight margins, so there is little leeway to increase wages significantly and still turn a profit. The only choice is to pass along some of those costs to customers to absorb the higher wages. There are underserved human resources from former military, second chance citizens, and disabled communities that are eager to work in the food industry. Labor challenges require special attention to inclusivity, professional development, and team building.

### **Share why the relationship with on-time product delivery and supply chain disruptions have impacted the food industry and customer expectations.**

Whether constrained by labor issues, ingredient issues, inflationary pressures, supplier limitations, the food industry is being squeezed daily to provide amazing new products in a timely manner. That has never been easy, but supplier diversification, agile supply chains, and production adaptation have been heightened significantly. Around the world, meeting the on-time delivery expectations continues to be rough. One need only observe empty grocery store shelves to know popular products sell out as hard-to-find food SKUs. Additionally, food products may have simply been discontinued due to various disruptions.

### **How has the food manufacturing industry encouraged the amazing contribution of women?**

When I started my career, many of the food quality, safety, and scientists were women. Now we see women in VP management levels, but sadly there is still a glass ceiling when one looks at the C-Suite or Board of Directors for most food manufacturing companies. More successful women in the food industry are moving to buy or launch new food product companies ranging from plant-based to organic and gluten-free product lines. When women are at the top of food manufacturing management, there tends to be a cooperative and team building environment encouraging innovation and experimentation.

### **Do you think there is more or less cultural cohesiveness in your three decades in the food manufacturing industry?**

That is a tough question to answer. The industry is highly competitive and some in senior management are hanging on to the status quo. It is necessary to create a safety net for creative thinking and for testing new ideas. Understanding there is tremendous pressure to produce the right product, on time, every time, success in food innovation requires a "trial and error" approach. Building a great team and encouraging fresh ideas is key.

### **To what do you attribute the increasing global participation in the food manufacturing industry?**

This goes back to the supply chain and supplier diversification as well as COVID. Black pepper from China was hard to procure during the height of COVID. Even as the twentieth ingredient in a soup or sauce, many food manufacturers did not have alternative sourcing. A change in the recipe means a change in labeling, and other considerations in the final food preparation and taste. A simple change is never simple. As international foods continue to grow in popularity, global food manufacturers are supplying and meeting the increasing demand.

**What are you most looking forward to over the next several years for the food manufacturing industry?**

My great hope for the industry at large would be a steady and significant improvement in innovation of process, people, and products that is culturally supported by food manufacturing management. Allowing a layer of creativity to flourish will result in great food products, happy employees, and delighted customers.