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Who'd Have Thought You Could Get Water From Cactus? Sarita Lopez Did

BY A.J. FLICK

By now, nobody bats an eye at the concept of drinking coconut water. Sarita Lopez wants to do the same thing for prickly pear cactus – not from the bright red, juicy fruits prized by jam makers and mixologists as well as desert-dwelling javelinatas, but the green pads guarded by some of the nastiest needles you'll find.

"In Mexico, they're used for so many purposes, even prescribed by doctors in powdered capsules," Lopez said. "Companies are making vegan leather from cactus as well as fencing to keep cattle in. It's an amazing miracle plant.

"And it doesn't need water to grow. It grows back quickly," she added. "It has a lot of uses."

But ... as a hydrating beverage?

Lopez put her background in the beverage industry and her love for the cactus paddles together, at first bravely removing the spikes and selling the pads that locals used in juices in farmers markets, then eventually floating the idea that they'd make a nutritious, hydrating drink.

By 2017, she created a cactus

water drink that she shopped around, collecting feedback.



"I was constantly doing demos in stores to get feedback," she said.

Consumers wanted something a little sweeter and wanted to see more nutrition information on the panel, she said. They also wanted a more recyclable packaging than the aseptic packaging she was using.

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Supercultures Deliver Vegan Ingredients Safely

BY A.J. FLICK

What if vegan food ingredients could bypass the use of animals, plants or land – thus sparing limited resources and energy – without the undesired textures of substitute proteins, plant-based milk or artificial ingredients?

Kingdom Supercultures has taken the "if" out of the equation using a fermentation method to curate food ingredients in a lab. The company likens the process to using microbes like Lego building blocks.

"The original idea was to take natural processes that have worked for thousands of years for beer, wine, cheese and yogurt," co-founder Kendall Dabaghi said. "We discovered different combinations of natural microbial cultures and transformed them into a different end product.

"It's all about using cutting-edge advances and harnessing them to speed up the process for new combinations of natural cultures," he said. "We've taken what's been happening over the last hundred years without the artificial ingredients and chemicals but with the flavors, textures and functional health properties instead."

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Pamela's Adds Grain-Free Graham Crackers to Its Gluten-Free Line of Products

BY A.J. FLICK

Years before most consumers knew what gluten was and what effect it had, Pamela's offered baking mixes, snack bars, cookies and graham crackers as allergy-free alternatives to popular kitchen staples.

Now, Pamela's is going grain-free, with



one of the first grain-free graham crackers on the market.

"It's a natural development, which is what Pamela's is all about," said Chris Murphy, vice president of sales and marketing. "Going grain free helps improve digestive health.

Consumers who eliminate grains entirely from their diets are looking to reduce inflammation, improve digestive health or are on a weight-loss program, like the Paleo movement.

"Pamela's has been a pioneer in the gluten-free space since 1988," Murphy said. "It sprang out of the need and desire to offer more creative solutions to common foods people were eating, especially

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Americans See 'Serving Size,' 'Portion Size' as Same, Survey Shows

Results of a recent survey paint a picture of consumer confusion about portion and serving sizes. Despite having distinct definitions, many Americans use these terms interchangeably, highlighting an educational opportunity to help consumers better understand food choices.

The International Food Information Council recently conducted a survey to gauge how much consumers know – and whether they know the difference between "serving size" and "portion size." The "Understanding Portion and Serving Sizes" survey of 1,000 U.S. adults first asked

whether they had an understanding of the two terms.

Ninety-one percent said they had at least some understanding about "serving size," while 90 percent said the same of "portion size."

Respondents were then given a list of possible definitions that included the most accurate descriptions for both serving size and portion size and were asked to pick the two descriptions that best align with their understanding. (Serving size is based on a standardized amount of a food or beverage that people typically consume in one sitting, while

portion size is the amount of food or beverage someone chooses to eat in one sitting.)

Among those claiming knowledge of serving sizes, about half (48 percent) picked the correct definition (the amount typically consumed) and/or thought it was defined by the company that created the product (46 percent). Fewer (39 percent) believed that the term was defined by dietitians and health professionals, while 33 percent thought it was defined by government agencies such as the FDA and 33 percent believed it was the amount one chooses to consume (portion size).

But out of those claiming at least some understanding of portion sizes, the most popular definition ("a standardized amount typically consumed") was the same as the serving size – identical at 48 percent – indicating that consumers essentially conflate the two terms. Slightly behind, 45 percent correctly identified it as the amount one chooses to consume, which was followed by "defined by dietitians and health professionals" (44 percent).

Respondents were then shown complete definitions of both

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Oregon Farms Form Agricultural Collaboration

In January, Frank Foti and Brenda Smola-Foti launched The Ground, an evolving collection of virtual and physical destinations. By nurturing the interconnectedness of nature, people and community, The Ground takes a holistic approach to hospitality with a philosophy of belonging that comes to life through five verticals: accommodations, programs and events, wellness, agroecology and food and beverage.

Its agroecology philosophy is rooted in the understanding that humans are a part of nature, which was introduced in 2015 with the founding of Tabula Rasa Farms, a Carlton-Ore.-based regenerative agriculture farm raising heritage animals.

The Ground recently expanded its ecosystem with the addition of Source Farms, a new agricultural collaboration between Tabula Rasa Farms and its neighbor to the northwest, Kookoolan Farms. Source Farms will support farmers, animals and

the planet through its commitment to producing, growing and raising the healthiest foods possible.

“We have long been inspired by the work of Chrissie and Koorosh at Kookoolan Farms, particularly their dedication to sustainable farming practices,” Frank Foti said. “Through the Source Farms partnership, we are guided by our shared goal of being the producers and purveyors of the best-tasting, most nutritious food available while also providing the best life for the animals, supported by practices that are good for the planet.

“Uniting our resources means we have the opportunity to further collaborate with two people we hold in incredibly high esteem, and we’re also able to invest in an infrastructure that allows for our continued mutual growth.”

Kookoolan Farms is a diversified farm located in Yamhill, Ore. Established in 2005, Kookoolan Farms connects cus-

tomers to 100 percent grass-fed, grass-finished beef and lamb; sustainably sourced, premium wild-caught seafood; pasture-raised organic chicken; eggs and honey. Over the last several years, Kookoolan Farms has undergone incredible growth and its unique partnership with Tabula Rasa Farms represents the opportunity to scale up to meet customer demand while remaining true to its values of regenerative agriculture.

“We are humbled by the positive response we’ve received by our customers, who remain dedicated to supporting organizations that are committed to creating incredible opportunities that impact global climate change on a bigger scale,” said Chrissie Zaerpoor, co-founder of Kookoolan Farms. “Brenda and Frank’s commitment to planetary regeneration is aligned with our priorities.”

Customers of Kookoolan Farms and Tabula Rasa Farms have access to two local

shopping experiences: Kookoolan Farms Farm Store and the Farm Stand at Tabula Rasa. With the introduction of Source Farms, plans for additional locations, online ordering, credit card purchasing options, direct shipping and local delivery are under way.

While Source Farms acquired the Kookoolan Farms brand, the Zaerpoors are the operating leaders of the newly announced collaboration, and the organization will rely on them to build the foundation for growth. Through this partnership, Source Farms will be well positioned to help more small farms develop new ways to connect their customers with good food and the farmers that grow it.

In addition to Tabula Rasa Farms and Source Farms, The Ground includes 440 acres of land in outer Carlton and locations in the center of McMinnville and Carlton. **GN**

Nonprofit initiative Raises Nearly \$2.3M for Black- and Hispanic-Owned Small Businesses

A nonprofit initiative, Elevate Together, raised nearly \$2.3 million in its inaugural year to help accelerate the creation, growth and prosperity of Black- and Hispanic-owned small businesses. Elevate Together is powered by Round It Up America, founded by The ODP Corporation.

Through partnerships with the National Urban League and the United States Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, Elevate Together was designed to deliver education, access, and aid to small businesses with five employees or fewer.

With an initial investment of \$250,000, The ODP Corporation helped launch the program in Atlanta, Chicago, Fort Lauderdale, Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia and West Palm Beach. Throughout the year, local Urban League affiliates and His-

panic Chamber of Commerce chapters in these markets received technical assistance grants to provide eligible small business owners with access to free workshops and bootcamps, professional networks, mentorship services, and more.

In 2021, 89 Black- and Hispanic-owned small businesses were awarded cash grants, valued at \$5,000 or \$10,000, to help them continue to innovate and grow. Selected businesses were chosen based on established criteria created by local selection committees and were evaluated based upon their proposed business plans. Certified mentors from The Venture Mentoring Team were also paired with many of these small businesses to provide advisory support and help guide them on their entrepreneurial journeys.

“Becoming one of the small business grant recipients from the Elevate Together initiative enabled us to hire additional staff, secure a new delivery van and make short-term investments to hopefully expand our product line and open a second location,” said Nadeige Sterlin, co-owner of La Paix Bakery in Miramar, Fla. “I want to continue to pay it forward by sharing our story to help inspire other Black and Hispanic entrepreneurs to keep reaching for their dreams. If we all work together, we can collectively strengthen our community long-term, while saving and creating more local jobs in the short term.”

“Elevate Together was created to help address systemic discrimination and historical racial disparities in business

growth and profitability in Black and Hispanic communities,” said Gerry Smith, CEO for The ODP Corporation. “We’re inspired by the success stories from small business owners whose lives we’ve touched through this program so far, and we hope to continue building a coalition of like-minded companies to help advance business creation and growth opportunities for Black and Hispanic businesses for years to come.”

With support from community partners and corporate partners like NCR Foundation, plus Office Depot and OfficeMax customers and associates, the program will expand its reach in 2022 to help small businesses grow in Dallas, Detroit, Fort Worth, Houston, Minneapolis, Phoenix and beyond. **GN**

Cactus Water

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“So I began rebranding and reformulated the cactus water, based on what customers had told me,” she said.

The result is ¡Cactus! The Desert Hydrator, organic cactus water in slim, 12-ounce cans in three refreshing flavors: lime, papaya and watermelon. Each serving has 30 calories and is a great source of Vitamin C.

Hydrocolloid in the cactus leaf binds to water and acts like a sponge, Lopez said, giving the cactus the ability to absorb and retain water and micronutrients – and survive in the scorching desert heat. ¡Cactus! contains this same hydrocolloid, which boosts hydration, absorption and retention in the human body.

“The biggest thing in telling my story is that the cactus is sustainable,” Lopez said. “People are drawn to that, knowing that it’s an ingredient in which we’re borrowing

from Mother Nature, not taking. It grows back. It’s like it just needs a haircut.”

Millions of acres in Mexico are dedicated to growing the fast-growing nopales cactus, in addition to farms in Peru and Africa, she noted.

In the beginning, Lopez used cactus grown on her parents’ Napa Valley property.

“I need so much more than my little farm can grow,” said Lopez, who sources from organic farms for the cactus now.

“You can pronounce everything in the ingredients,” she said.

Even the pandemic was no match for the hardy desert drink. Before COVID-19 hit U.S. shores, Lopez researched cactus for antioxidants and found that it had value for building immunity. So while her rebranding had the bad timing to fall in March 2020, it was fortunate enough to provide something consumers were looking for.

“I really think it helped us survive, that we had vitamin C in our label so when people were on Amazon searching for immu-

nity-boosting beverages, luckily they found us.”

Lopez is working on developing new flavors and talking to investors so she can take ¡Cactus! to the next level.

“Right now, I’m focused on the West Coast, over to Texas,” she said.

Lopez had been living in Texas and moved to California to start her business on her parents’ property.

“I moved in with Mom and Dad, classic Millennial move,” she said, laughing. “But it allowed me to put every penny back into the business.”

¡Cactus! is a certified woman-owned, minority-owned business, which Lopez hopes will inspire more women, especially Hispanic women, to follow, even if the pains of growing her own business

sometimes felt as sharp as those cactus spikes.

“I’m not going to lie,” she said. “Sometimes, I’d be crying like it was the end of the world.

“But don’t be discouraged,” she tells fellow entrepreneurs. “Give it 24 hours and stay with it, if you can. It’s hard, but not impossible. Network as much as possible. Apply for pitch competitions to get money to get you started.”

Because of her experience in the beverage industry, Lopez knew it wouldn’t be easy.

“Competition is super fierce,” she said. “There are so many amazing brands out there.

“But I do get proud when I see my product on shelves and in reorders. I think that’s one of the really cool things about all this.” **GN**

