

Unwavering Ideals

Commitment to Quality Drives Eden Foods Founder



Early in his involvement with the enterprise that became Eden Foods, Michael Potter realized that he'd taken an unusual path for a kid from the Detroit suburbs. "I well remember the day that I first looked at a grain of wheat," he says now. "I'd never seen a grain of wheat in my life. "I remember saying to myself, this is amazing. How could I never have seen a grain of wheat before in my life? I'm 18 years old. I've been around a long time." Forty-two years later and counting, Potter actually has been around a while, he's the longtime president of a privately held corporation called Eden Foods, and it is now the oldest independent organic food producer in the United States. Protecting the company from corporate takeover, despite innumerable sweet offers from prospective buyers, has ensured its reputation. Eden is consistently awarded high marks for product integrity and a dogged dedication to organic ideals. EdenSoy®, which hit the market in 1983, was the first soymilk available commercially in the United States. Among many other honors, food magazines have rated its soy and tamari sauces highly, and Prevention rated Eden's Extra Virgin Spanish Olive Oil highest in flavor and protective nutrients out of 22 brands studied in 1999.

Potter's determination to keep his company's products free of insidious chemicals made the news in connection with the brewing outrage over bisphenol-A in can linings, when it was finally noticed that Eden Foods had eliminated BPA from its cans years before it became a scandal. How it happened is only one of the good stories Michael Potter shared.

— Chris Walters

Michael Potter

ACRES U.S.A. What were the origins of Eden Foods?

MICHAEL POTTER. It began as a little buying club amongst a group of University of Michigan students who wanted to get macrobiotic kinds of foods and had ended up ordering them from Erewhon in Boston and Chico-san in California.

ACRES U.S.A. What factors drove its expansion?

POTTER. The choice of sources was very limited, and there was the factor of students not having transportation to run around southeastern Michigan looking for things. The little student group attracted a lot of other people. All of a sudden we needed a place to do this. It turned into a little bit of a project which caused this little co-op

to get some cheap second-story, above-retail space to do it in and have the stuff shipped to. They'd break it down there and have people come in to get it. Like most of the co-ops of the time, I later learned, what happened was that a few people ended up doing a lot of work so a large number of folks could benefit. These few decided, "Hey, why don't we just retail this stuff? That way we get margin and it will be self-sustaining." That led to this co-op space turning into a little retail store. "While we're here, let's just leave the door open, and if people want to come in and buy stuff, they can." This little space up a long flight of steps near the University of Michigan campus became a small retail store. People were coming from quite large distances now. The retail store moved to a ground floor, got some space and shelving, and boom! It turned into a real retail store called Eden Foods.

ACRES U.S.A. How did the retail operation turn into a food wholesaler?

POTTER. The retail store was, from its inception, involved in handling food and repackaging food, which grew. Well, if we take this 50-pound bag of oats and we had a little roaster or a pizza oven, we could make granola. Let's sell little one-pound bags of that! Let's take this little Hobart mixer we have for mixing up the oats and grain flakes and nuts and raisins and maple syrup for the granola and corn oil — they make a little fixture that fits on the front of that and we can get roasted almonds or Spanish peanuts, and we can grind it up and do little 8-ounce jars of nut butters at the store. People don't want a pound of wheat; they want a two-pound bag of flour. Well, let's get a little stone mill and let's mill the grain and sell them flour.

ACRES U.S.A. Did you have to do a lot of reinventing the wheel because there was a yawning supply gap in the Midwest for these things as products, as opposed to raw materials?

POTTER. Well, yes. It wasn't there. The access to this stuff was in California and Massachusetts, on the two coasts, and there was virtually no source of it in the Midwest. We very quickly observed that the people coming into this second-floor space were traveling long distances. At that shop people were coming from Toronto, people were coming from Chicago, people were coming from Cincinnati. People drove long distances to have access to this stuff. At our second location on State Street I answered the phone one busy Saturday. I was familiar with this health food store in Royal Oak, about 30 miles away, called NutriFoods, and this old man who ran it. His name was Mr. Hurlbut. Here's what he said to me. "Yeah, Eden Foods, I don't particularly like the kind of people this brown rice brings into my store here, but I'd like to order some of that stuff with you guys, I'd like to get some of that stuff for my store." But the first thing he said was that he didn't particularly like the type of people it brought into his store. Hippie days! At the time we were placing orders with Chico-san and bringing in 100-pound burlap bags of short-grain brown rice from WEHA

farms, the origin of the Lundberg company. Of course I said, "Yeah, I'll get back with you, but sure, if you need a couple bags we can order them." They came into Ann Arbor and now they had to go from Ann Arbor to Royal Oak, and boom, you're a food wholesaler. You can't deliver

from Texas, we're getting this stuff from California and Erewon in Boston. We need to go out and find some farmers to grow this food for us around here." What we did, we went driving down country roads way outside of Ann Arbor, going to farms and knocking on the doors.

"These guys think deeply. Farming is very sophisticated. I don't care if you're doing it naturally or with lasers and GPS and massive tractors, it's sophisticated and it requires a great deal of attention to detail, which inevitably led into many, many conversations about what is organic."

it for free, gas costs money, and people's time costs money. That's how we got drug into becoming a wholesaler of these items, selling them to other retail stores, just by word of mouth.

ACRES U.S.A. You could have tried to open more retail outlets or even a series of restaurants, but the momentum of a business moves it in one direction or another. Was the paucity of supply in the upper Midwest the wind at your back moving you into wholesaling?

POTTER. Yes, it was. We were Arrowhead Mills' first distributor. We were the first company that he sold to at a distributor price. I commonly say that Eden Foods is Midwestern homemade soup. What's in the fridge? What's in the cupboard? Let's put together a nice pot of soup. The first Eden branded products had these stick-on labels — we bought rolls of them and we wrote by hand the net weight and what was on it — Eden granola. After we got tired of handwriting them, we bought some rubber stamps and started rubber-stamping these stick-on labels.

ACRES U.S.A. Next thing you know you've got a relationship with a printing company because you don't have time to stamp the labels by hand.

POTTER. Yep! And suppliers, which led us to, "Well heck, we're getting this stuff

Knock, knock. "Hello, we've got this little food company in Ann Arbor and we're looking for somebody to grow beans for us without pesticides, herbicides and fertilizers." That's what we said when they answered the door.

ACRES U.S.A. What was the response?

POTTER. "You want us to grow what? Are you crazy?" That was the typical response. We did find one man, his name was Tom Vreeland, and Tom actually said, "Yes, I'll do that for you, after 30 said, "Are you crazy?" Next time Tom planted he grew us some organic soybeans, well, organic-by-neglect as it's called today. But he didn't put the fertilizer, herbicides or pesticides on it. Then I put a little ad in the *Saginaw Valley News*, a little three or four-line want ad.

ACRES U.S.A. Tell us about the Saginaw Valley.

POTTER. The Valley is world-famous as a bean producing area. It's just one of the best places on planet Earth to grow beans, colored beans — navy beans, pinto beans, kidney beans, black turtle beans, etc. The climate, soil, weather — everything's perfect. There's a mother lode of beans up there, so we ran a little four-line classified ad — "Wanted: farmers to grow beans without agricultural chemicals for Eden Foods in Ann Arbor Michigan," and a

phone number. I got one response to that ad. His name was Ernie Fordos, and he said, "You know this ad and these beans without chemicals, we've been doing that for a few years here." I went up there and I met Ernie Fordos and he told me this story. He said, "A couple years ago me and my dad were out in the fields and we observed that there's no earthworms in these fields anymore, or in the soil here. The earthworms are all gone." They'd been farming according to the Michigan State University's land grant college extension service agricultural programs, a la Dow Chemical. Standing out in their fields, talking about the disappearance of all the earthworms, Ernie and his father decided that they were going to begin managing their farms so the earthworms would come back, which led them to stop using the agricultural chemicals.

ACRES U.S.A. What year is this?

POTTER. Right now we're talking '72 or so. We began to buy field crops from him, his beans. He'd grow these beans without these things and believe you me, they were not USDA No. 1 beans because the soil had been conditioned with agricultural chemicals and wasn't growing the healthiest of crops. Nevertheless, those crops were void of direct treatment with agricultural chemicals, and they were appealing to me and my customers in spite of the fact they weren't the prettiest beans you'd ever seen. Then, lo and behold, he says, "Well, I've got to rotate these fields and I have to grow some other crops, can you sell some pastry wheat?" We became an important customer to this farm. Ernie had children and he put them through Michigan State University's agricultural college. These college graduate sons came back, and with the help of their dad and their granddad they bought adjacent land and they grew field crops without agricultural chemicals that Eden Foods would buy. They would take these beans into their garages and barns and hand-sort them — the wife, the mother, the sister, the grandmother, the son, the father, and the grandpa — they would hand-sort these beans, put them in bags for us and we would take them back Ann Arbor and sell them. We saw his son Jim grow up, go to the university, come back and take up farming. Then Jim had a son who he sent

to the agricultural college at Michigan State University, and Ernie's grandson came back and took over Grandpa's farm and grew field crops for Eden Foods! Just before Ernie died his family came to visit and they were in this room that I'm talking to you from, Ernie and his son and his grandson and their wives and their kids. It was a reunion of sorts. We'd been through so much together. Although we didn't participate in their family life, we paid them a price so they could afford to send their kids to college, and that motivated their college graduates to come back and do the same thing, grow organic foods. The exact opposite of what was happen-

"We speak the truth the best we can as we see it. To be in the position of opposing companies with the reputation of a Monsanto is kind of scary."

ing *en masse* in the agricultural community in the United States of America was happening with this organic farming effort here in Michigan.

ACRES U.S.A. Jumping ahead a few years, you've got a thriving wholesale operation, but it's still many years before the USDA Organic program. How did you handle the challenges of supply ingredient integrity and crafting your own standards?

POTTER. Farmers are not known for being the most intellectual people in the world necessarily, but believe you me they study their craft, and they get into the minutiae of it. Inevitably we would be in conversations with them about practices on the farm, in the planting, the growing, the weeding, the tilling, the storage, the cleaning and the handling. I remember going from the hand sorting to "let's get a little electric eye." That was a big deal. Then it was a big deal when Eden Foods said we're no longer going to take anything but USDA No. 1 grade. We couldn't have done that in the early parts of organic agriculture because organic growers didn't produce USDA No. 1 quality. Why? Because they had to go through withdrawing that soil and those systems from the chemicals to

establishing vitality in the soil that could produce USDA No. 1 without that stuff. These guys think deeply. Farming is very sophisticated. I don't care if you're doing it naturally or with lasers and GPS and massive tractors, it's sophisticated and it requires a great deal of attention to detail, which inevitably led into many, many conversations about what is organic. There were so many questions from so many different types of agriculture. We were overwhelmed and we were unqualified to answer them. What I did was go over to Europe to find out what they're doing over there. I went to Belgium to a company called Lima Foods, and I

visited with its founder Pierre Gevaert because organic agriculture and systems were more evolved over there than they were here. My goal was to acquire copies of their standards and their organic programs and share them with our growers.

ACRES U.S.A. What did you glean from the trip?

POTTER. They gave me all this organic certification documentation and it was all in French! I brought it back and I turned it over to the University of Michigan, where it was translated into English. I distributed that information to all our growers — here's what they're doing over there. Here are their systems. The translation of those documents ended up being the bedrock of the Organic Crop Improvement Association (OCIA), which was one of the first organic certifying agencies in the United States. It made it to California Certified Organic Farmers (CCOF). It made it to all of them through the grapevine.

ACRES U.S.A. What was the next step toward building a system?

POTTER. As organic certification agencies are popping up left and right all of a sudden, I'm getting pressure from my

customers and from other people in the industry to have these people certify organic food. Wait a minute, I thought. We know what we're doing, we're ahead of them, we've got our name on it and that's good enough. Eden says it's organic, and it's organic to Eden's standards. I struggled against accepting third-party certification mightily. I didn't want anything to do with it.

ACRES U.S.A. What persuaded you?

POTTER. I went to a natural foods convention. Pierre Gevaert, the president of Lima over in Belgium, came over specifically to convince me to accept third-party certification. He told me numerous stories about different things that had happened in the European market that created chaos and fraud and problems in the organic community on the agricultural side, the processing side, and the consumer side. He said part of the solution is this third-party certification. You have to accept it, you must. He put heavy pressure on me. Now here's a guy I respected as an elder, a pioneer, and he's leaning hard on me to accept third-party certification as part of the organic model. Needless to say, third-party certification didn't do away with confusion and variances in standards and methodologies, which catalyzed industry people into reaching out to government for federal standardization.

ACRES U.S.A. Can you give an example of a problem that wouldn't go away?

POTTER. The state of California was the first government agency in the United States to pass an organic law. It was consistent with what CCOF was doing at the time, which was one year of no chemicals and you can grow an organic crop. Everything out of Europe was three years. What people were doing was this — they would put enough chemicals on to basically carry it over for 12 months. They'd just layer on extra fertilizer, extra pesticides, and extra herbicides. People were rotating fields in and out of organic, still utilizing chemicals. I said I've never seen a law legitimize fraud as much as this law has. But I had the experience of watching a horrible law become a good law, because many years later the state of California changed their organic law

from one year to three years. Then there was a debate — is it one year to the harvest or one year to the planting? That's a big difference.

ACRES U.S.A. Did you ever consider financing the transition of people that you saw as potentially terrific suppliers for you?

POTTER. Here's what we did. We talked to people and they asked, "What am I going to do with my crops for three years while I'm not using chemicals." We said we would market their transitional crops and sell them as transitional crops. We did that a lot. We were in no position to finance farmers. We didn't have the money to do anything like that, that was just out of the question, and we were never asked to do it.

ACRES U.S.A. Is that kind of arrangement less common nowadays?

POTTER. It's less of a factor. Most recently we've done it with tree fruit growers — apples, cherries, like that.

ACRES U.S.A. When did you notice that people really wanted you on the block during the corporate takeover by major food corporations? When did the offers start arriving, in the mid-'80s?

POTTER. Around there. I was going to say '85.

ACRES U.S.A. When did Eden assume the honor of oldest original organic food company?

POTTER. When the AOL guy bought Walnut Acres in Pennsylvania. When he sold out to that guy, shut down the whole farming operation and took the brand to New Jersey, we became the oldest organic, natural food company in the country, in North America for that matter.

ACRES U.S.A. Did economic factors ever combine to place almost unbearable pressure on you to either approach Wall Street for financing, thus giving up a measure of control, or consider selling the company?

POTTER. It got bad a number of times. I remember when fuel prices spiked in the '70s and I was running these trucks delivering food all over the Midwest. I was naïve and negligent enough to not adjust my trucking to reflect the change in the cost of fuel. It almost put us out of business. I had a warehouse fire on November 27, 1979. Our warehouse and inventory and offices and everything just burned to the ground, turned into a cinder. That almost killed us. But regarding Wall Street, in the very early '70s I was told I should do an IPO. What, pray tell, is an IPO? I went to the biggest accounting firm in Ann Arbor at the time, suited up and showed up. I didn't have a clue, but these gentlemen were kind enough to spend some time with me and give me enough information to figure out that that wasn't an option for Eden Foods. I would have needed, they told me, \$125,000 or \$150,000 or something like that. We're talking early '70s, and it was a lot of money in those days. I quickly realized I didn't have the money. But I watched other people do IPOs and I continued to study IPOs. The change from a long-term perspective to every 90 days filing your SEC-required reports changes corporate culture, corporate ethics, corporate goals, operations, and how the company is run. I thought all these dynamics they were articulating were horrible — my God, I could never do that to Eden Foods. Then I had the opportunity to observe companies with which I was familiar, where I had rapport with the founders, the owners, and the managers. I watched what happened to their companies. It went from a good, logical, valuable work ethic to gotta-make-the-numbers. Never say never, but I've avoided the topic because of the impact it has on companies, and decided to just keep doing what we're doing.

ACRES U.S.A. When did imposters, false organics, enter the picture for Eden Foods?

POTTER. Early on, very early on. We would visit farms here and there and we would find them spreading chemicals — "What are you doing?" Or we would go in their barn — "What's this? What do you do with that?" If there's money to be made, come on, it doesn't bring the best out in a lot of folks.

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ACRES U.S.A. How did you respond to the debut of genetically modified food?

POTTER. We banned them in early 1993. Obviously we had heard about them sometime before that and had done our research, done our homework. We again looked to Europe, the U.K. and Germany, France, and Belgium, for the information coming from the environmentalists and natural foods industries over there. We read it, studied it, and became alarmed. The first thing we did was talk to our suppliers. Just the fact that a company, albeit a small one, was alarmed about this sent shockwaves through the supply side. We've been active ever since in trying to inform folks about what's going on with their food regarding genetic engineering. I don't think it's been anything more than us doing our job for our customers and for ourselves. We eat this stuff!

ACRES U.S.A. Has the impact from GMO drift on your suppliers come to occupy a bigger share of your time?

POTTER. Huge! What it's become is an enormous amount of work to insure segregation to avoid contamination, to acquire non-genetically engineered seed, to test and test and re-test so that we can properly say to folks, "GEO Free." It's a huge burden, it's a huge cost.

ACRES U.S.A. Has it raised the price of your products?

POTTER. It's raised our overhead, that's for sure. It's raised our requirement for document files, sample storage, and laboratory analysis of various sorts. Yes, it's raised our costs, which ultimately have to get passed through to people who purchase the food.

ACRES U.S.A. It would at least be reassuring if the government took an impartial stance. Yet the Wikileaks release documents the State Department applying fierce pressure on a country, France, that chose to keep GMOs out of its food supply.

POTTER. If you combine the public relations power of a Monsanto with their profit margins, and you couple that with the USDA, EPA and FDA basically all

functioning as the marketing departments for this stuff — that's why it's not going away. It's funny how the GMO merchants say that we're the fearmongers when in fact they're the ones who have a militaristic attitude toward crop production. Win the battles over Mother Nature with our heavy weaponry. They're insane. I've been concerned and scared. Eden Foods is a very small company and you take a giant like Monsanto. It's kind of scary to speak against forces like that. We speak the truth the best we can as we see it. To be in the position of opposing companies with the reputation of a Monsanto is kind of scary.

"I was very abruptly and rudely informed by this lawyer that I had absolutely no right to the answer to the question that I was seeking. I had no right as a citizen of the United States, as a consumer of canned foods, as a canned food manufacturer, or as a canned food buyer to know the answers to the questions about the product I was buying."

ACRES U.S.A. How much business does Eden Foods handle during a given year?

POTTER. We do about \$50-\$55 million a year in sales. In the professional picture, we're a small concern. We're a small company. I think some people out there think that we're a big company. That's a mistaken impression. We are not a big company. Fifty million a year is miniscule.

ACRES U.S.A. As far as managing your supply chain and your distributor chain is concerned, what is different compared to a decade or two ago?

POTTER. We didn't have the disciplines in all our areas of vulnerability to genetically engineered DNA contamination. That's been enhanced. We know the people, the farms and the fields, the land and the food we take to market is produced on and who it's produced by. We are pretty thorough in knowing what we're taking to market.

ACRES U.S.A. Do you have to keep in closer touch with people on both ends, supply and distribution than you did previously?

POTTER. Yes. I think when I started out in business there was more stability. The rate of change in individuals in certain positions has certainly accelerated, both on the supply side but even more so downstream on the marketing side. The demand for staying in touch with folks has increased, if for no other reason than the requirement of maintaining a healthy relationship through personnel changes.

ACRES U.S.A. What is causing that volatility?

POTTER. I think economics is a driving factor. I think the overall condition and energy of our society in general is more conducive to less stability. That's kind of vague but it's very tangible from my seat. I think the stability of our culture, our society here in the United States, was more solid 30 or 40 years ago than it is today. It now seems a little more tentative, a little more transitional as opposed to stable. On the supply side with some of our growers, we're going through more generational changes. Dad did this, we're dealing with that now. Some of the initial growers we started working with have grown beyond their hands-on relationship with their farms. I look on the supply side versus the marketing and distribution side, and they're kind of like night and day. People used to get a job and pretty much stick with it. People change jobs how many times in their careers today? It's real different. And in the marketing and

distribution side of things — lots of personnel changes. That's a challenge, a big challenge. The ability to be courteous with individuals is more difficult. You used to get to know somebody, and then it was steady as she goes for long periods of time.

ACRES U.S.A. Eden is a privately held corporation and it's had the continuity of one person, you, in charge for several decades. Who's going to take over when it's time to slow down or retire?

POTTER. I had the benefit of working with some of the finest people in the country on making a plan for my inevitable death. That involved protecting Eden Foods and establishing a methodology of transition for the company upon my death. Basically, if I died today, the Board of Directors takes over the company. The Board of Directors here are the key people who, with me, run the company and make the decisions, and obviously I've hand-picked and trained and shared my values with them pretty thoroughly. I've done the best I can do to provide for a continuation of the ethic of Eden Foods beyond my participation.

ACRES U.S.A. Some time ago you switched to cans that do not have bisphenol-A in the lining. A decade passed, and in a delayed-effect somewhat rare in the annals of American business, BPA became a hot topic in the political sphere and the news media, with Eden Foods emerging as a trailblazer of sorts. What is the story behind Eden and BPA?

POTTER. There's a lot of serendipity in there. I came to work one day and one of my marketing staff said to me, "bisphenol-A, BPA, check this out," and I read this report about it. It was the first I'd heard of it. The report indicated that it was fairly ubiquitous in canned food. Okay, I own a cannery in Indiana, a bean cannery, so that got my attention. I eat these beans, and I feed these beans to my children and grandchildren. I can't believe this, wow. Further research took me to Germany, not physically, just research-wise via the Internet. I educated myself about bisphenol-A and read all this information out of the EU, about it being an endocrine disrupter, and there is no safe level, on and on. I dove right

into it. Oh my God! It's in my product, it couldn't be. Well, I found out that it is. Boom! I was motivated. I got personally very actively involved in doing the research. At the time I purchased cans from the three largest can manufacturers in the United States. I contacted them all by phone. I had numerous conversations, I got passed around, and I got the spin. Eventually after hundreds of phone calls, hundreds of hours, I wasn't getting anywhere. I would end up with the spin. These people at the canning companies basically tried to make me go away, but I persisted. I had a bit of a chemistry background and I researched it from that angle. In the process of talking with these can manufacturers and being told that this is proprietary information umpteen times, I finally had a bit of a breakthrough with one gentleman at the Ball Corporation. He obviously made the decision to provide some insight to me about BPA, how it ends up being in these enamel can linings, why it's there, and the chemistry of it. The key questions that I persistently asked for answers to, he wouldn't answer, couldn't answer — proprietary information. But he gave me more information than the canning industry wanted me to have.

ACRES U.S.A. Was there a specific question that shook loose the information?

POTTER. No. I think what shook it loose was the persistence. It wasn't any specific question. I wasn't going away. Finally they passed me on to a law firm in the beltway of Washington D.C. This is a large law firm. I made the call of course, and I asked my question. I was very abruptly and rudely informed by this lawyer that I had absolutely no right to the answer to the question that I was seeking. I had no right as a citizen of the United States, as a consumer of canned foods, as a canned food manufacturer, or as a canned food buyer to know the answers to the questions about the product I was buying. He was very emphatic. I was flabbergasted. What do you mean I have no right to know? I have no right to know what's poisoning my children? I have no right to know what I'm feeding my grandchildren? This is the Twilight Zone!

ACRES U.S.A. And then?

POTTER. We're over two years into this now, of constant phone calls and spin cycles, if you will. I just kept putting one foot in front of the other any way I could and asking the next logical question and making the next logical phone call and writing the next logical letter. Eventually I came around to asking the individual at the Ball Corporation the following question. "Okay, before this BPA lining, what did you guys use? Give me something, let's go retro." I did my homework and studied this oleoresinous C-enamel, enamel that hadn't been used in years by the canning industry. I asked the Ball Corporation, "Will you please make cans for me with that lining?" Needless to say, it took the better part of a year to get an answer to that question. Eventually I did get an affirmative. They had to order the materials to make these batches of this and segregate, clean out machinery — I mean, this is a big deal. And we are not Campbell Soup buying billions of cans a year. We're a relatively small concern. Nevertheless they said yes.

ACRES U.S.A. What vintage technology are we talking about?

POTTER. We're talking 1950s.

ACRES U.S.A. Exactly what was the old lining?

POTTER. It was an oleoresinous C-enamel, that's what it was called by the industry — C-enamel. Resin-based and it didn't have BPA in it. What I learned from the Ball Corporation about the BPA lining I might as well share with you because it's indicative of a much larger can of worms, potentially. In the process of applying the enamels to the steel, to the inside of the can, you start with ingredient chemicals and you mix them up. You apply them, they combine, and there's no one chemical reaction. There is a series of chemical reactions and chemical changes that happen in the application of this enamel which ends up lining the can. In the process some of the transitional chemicals that are created from the ingredient chemicals are trapped in an incomplete state, short of the desired goal for the ingredient chemicals. They're trapped in the middle, and now you have unintended chemical residues. This is a key fact. Now BPA, I'm told, is one of

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those. It's not really intended, but it's there and it does leach into the food.

ACRES U.S.A. It's an intermediate chemical that is created in the process of forming the finished lining?

POTTER. Yep. And the reason I shared that with you is that there are potentially many other chemicals yet unknown. They know about them, but you and I don't, and the public doesn't, and EPA doesn't. The federal government doesn't.

ACRES U.S.A. When did Eden's BPA-free cans roll off the line?

POTTER. In early April of 1999 we got our first finished product from the canner we own down in Indiana, packed in these C-enamel BPA-free cans. That was the culmination of a hell of a lot of work.

ACRES U.S.A. What was the fallout in terms of consumer response and the food industry? Did other companies adopt this alternative?

POTTER. It's interesting, because when we did that, I did it for myself, I did it for my children, I did it for my customers,

and I did it for my employees. I did what I had to do to keep my word with my staff. When we realized a solution to the BPA can lining, nobody in the United States had yet heard of bisphenol-A. When this thing broke about a year ago, a common question I was asked by folks was, "Did you market the fact that you did that?" Market BPA-free? There was nothing to market. How do you tell somebody it's BPA-free when nobody's ever heard of BPA? So we didn't tell anybody.

ACRES U.S.A. Was it known within your industry though?

POTTER. It was known within our company, and we have very frank conversations with many members of our industry at all levels all the time, every day. We told people, but there was zero interest in it other than from a few individuals, and we did give them guidance. Eventually that reached a critical mass fairly recently and it broke out into the public domain as an issue.

ACRES U.S.A. Meanwhile there were other companies selling cans bearing the organic label and lined with a substance containing this dubious compound?

POTTER. Ignorance is bliss; knowledge is responsibility. For most of that time those people were unaware of it, and they had no duty or responsibility to their customers or their loved ones to do anything because of their ignorance. On the other hand, in the process of this socially critical mass being reached, all of them became aware of it as it became an issue socially, industrially, ecologically, environmentally, and organically. These people learned very shortly that Eden Foods had developed an alternative, a solution, an alternative to BPA. And much to my surprise, not one organic food company was willing to spend the extra money to avoid it. *Not one.*

ACRES U.S.A. That's stunning.

POTTER. It's sad. But now this is post-Wall Street money takeover of the organic foods industry.

ACRES U.S.A. What are margins like in the canned foods business?

POTTER. Canned foods as a category is one of the most price-competitive imaginable. Just a tenth of a penny is huge in the cost of a can. When you're talking multiples of that, many multiples, who's going to stick their neck out first and be non-competitive price-wise? Nobody. Nobody would do it. Nobody did it. My purchasing department came to me one day and said we've got an inquiry, a call from one of our competitors. They wanted to know where we get those things. Should I tell them or not? I said share it! We have to share it. We can't keep something like that to ourselves. That's unethical given the nature of the beast here.

ACRES U.S.A. Now it's early 2011, BPA is a scandal that won't go away, and major companies are busy announcing their plans to switch over to non-BPA cans. At least we can take heart that the cat is out of this particular bag.

POTTER. Yes. Lord knows how many of these types of chemicals are ubiquitous in our food system here in the United States. I think there are a lot of other problems that just haven't reached the critical mass of knowledge that need to be addressed as well. The food manufacturing industry in this country has taken proprietary, trade-secret stances on information about food processing, food content, food growing and manufacturing practices. And they have the support of government in keeping reality out of public awareness. That's a damn shame.

ACRES U.S.A. It's an enormous fight and it has to be fought from below. Is the moral of the story that consumers have to be the ones to force industry's hand?

POTTER. I think so. It's essential that people ask questions and get answers — demand answers. If something's in the dark, then out of sight, out of mind. The change has to be consumer-driven. That's how it's worked in Europe. If the big money interests have an enormous amount of money to spend on misinforming the public, and they get the cooperation of government agencies in doing so, the only hope to counter that is a populist movement.

For more information on Eden Foods go to www.edenfoods.com.

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