

## Tea party

BY MINDY FAVREAU

Since he founded Wise Acre Inc. in 2006, Jim Picariello has spent lots of time in his 1990 Dodge Caravan. Whenever one of the eight Whole Foods stores in Maine and Massachusetts ran out of the company's frozen organic tea treats, Picariello loaded his van with at least 1,000 of the company's Frosteas and Frostbites, packed in coolers with dry ice, and trucked the reorder there himself. He made the trips about every two weeks, sometimes going as far as Hadley in western Massachusetts — a six-hour trek one way from the company's headquarters and manufacturing facility in Blue Hill.

But recently, Wise Acre's president has been able to give his car a break. The company has landed two national distribution contracts that will put its slushy treats in stores from Maine to Florida. In February, Wise Acre signed a deal with Connecticut-based United Natural Foods Inc. to distribute the pops to Whole Foods and other organic and natural food stores along the East Coast. And just this month, the company netted a contract with Scarborough-based Hannaford Bros. Co. and its ice cream and frozen food distributor, Sure Winner Foods of Saco, that will see Wise Acre products debut in all 164 Hannaford stores by June 23.

The contracts have allowed Wise Acre to expand not only its geographic presence, but also its market. The contract with Sure Winner Foods, which also distributes to grocery chain Stop & Shop, is a prime jumping-off point for the company to move from the natural foods market to mainstream grocery stores, says Picariello. "It's an opportunity where we have our foot in the door to start talking to everyone else, which was part of the plan originally," he says. "We're pleasantly surprised that we have the opportunity to do this earlier than we were planning."

To accommodate the upswing in business, Wise Acre is in the midst of expanding its manufacturing facility, which it moved into in November 2007. Currently, the company can produce 3,000 pops in eight hours. Once the upgrades are complete, the company will be able to churn out more than 20,000 treats in one shift. Picariello says he's also planning to add four more people this summer to Wise Acre's



PHOTO/RICHARD MERRILL

*Cool treat: Jim Picariello stumbled on the idea for tea pops three years ago after dumping leftover green tea into plastic Popsicle molds*

staff of seven.

The company has come a long way from its beginnings in Picariello's kitchen, where he stumbled across the idea for frozen tea pops about three years ago after putting some leftover green tea into plastic Popsicle molds. Grants totaling \$25,000 from the Maine Technology Institute helped get the business started, and the Department of Food Science and Human Nutrition at the University of Maine helped Picariello develop the company's five flavors: herbal, yerba mate and jasmine green tea, as well as honey and maple lemon.

For more than a year, Picariello held demonstrations of his products at food co-ops around the midcoast, and Whole Foods agreed to stock the treats as part of a market test run. He'd been applying to United Natural Foods to get his products distributed, but hadn't been able to

pique the company's interest until, in September 2007, Wise Acre went to the Natural Food Expo East in Baltimore and won the award for most innovative new product, beating out 1,700 other exhibitors. A United rep at the expo agreed that day to sign the company.

With two distribution contracts and the approach of warmer weather, Picariello says he expects the company's growth to pick up even more. Though he won't divulge sales figures, he says he expects the growth to be "exponential."

The contracts also give the 36-year-old more time to play president. "I actually get to run the business now," he says. "Instead of having all my business meetings on the phone while driving to Massachusetts, I can do it in an office." ■

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