



Companion strikes deals with Whole Foods, Straub's

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Specialty bread business Companion Baking Co. reached distribution deals with a pair of new customers in late October: Straub's Markets and Whole Foods Market.

Those new wholesale customers will help keep Companion on track to reach \$7 million in sales this year, while profits will be flat from 2008, said Josh Allen, president of the company.

The company is supplying bagels to Whole Foods' two area stores in Brentwood and Town and Country and supplying a full line of its products to Straub's at the specialty St. Louis grocer's four retail locations — Clayton, the Central West End, Webster Groves and Town and Country.

"We'd been out of Straub's for about eight years," Allen said.

The change came when a new bakery manager for Straub's renewed the company's effort to find local suppliers. Straub's Vice President Tripp Straub said the new bakery manager, Mike Vernon, saw that the demographic of Companion's customers and Straub's customers matched up, which prompted Straub's to reconsider Companion.

"We've always carried many local products," Straub said. As part of the change, Straub's is dropping products from LaBrea Bakery of Van Nuys, Calif.

About six months ago Whole Foods, which specializes in natural and organic products, changed its supplier policy to attract more local producers, said Kate Klotz, a spokeswoman for the national chain in Chicago. Previously, Whole Foods wanted its local suppliers to ship to other Whole Foods operations around the country, and a number of them said they were having difficulty keeping up with the demand, Klotz said.

"We've had a focus on local suppliers for nearly three years, as long as they could meet our quality standards," she said.

Allen said Companion also concentrates on keeping suppliers local, with about 85 percent of its flour milled in the St. Louis area. Other specialty flours are brought in from Kansas, "which is about as local as we can source it," he said.

In addition to its wholesale bakery business, Companion operates three retail coffee shops — in the Central West End, Clayton and Ladue. Leading local supermarket chain Schnuck's already carries Companion products at some stores, and Dierbergs Markets carries Companion at all its stores.

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