A* Bruce Foods breakthrough

Sweet potato pancake mix to gain heavy promotional emphasis

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LAFAYETTE — Take one small, frozen, sweet potato pancake mix. Mix with two eggs. Add water. Bake in a non-stick frying pan.

That’s the recipe for success at Bruce Foods, which has come to rely on the mix as its base product. While the sweet potato may have a low profile at the dinner table, Bruce’s sales have become the No. 1 selling brand in the nation for instantly mixed pancake mixes.

And next year is expected to be bigger than ever. 2000 will be the year of the mix, said J.S. "Jim" Brown III, president of Bruce Foods.

"It’s a vegetable whose time has come," Brown said recently from his corporate office in New Berne. "Consumers are in a more positive frame of mind."

This fall, Bruce Foods rolled out its newest product — Bruce Foods Sweet Potato Pancake Mix. The mix, which took 18 months to perfect, has been extensively tested in Texas and Louisiana.

"That’s the highest sales mix on the breakfast table," Brown said. The breakfast mix category had more than $3 billion in total sales in 1998.

"Our goal is to get 10 to 15 percent of that category," Brown said.

The pancakes are low in fat and have no cholesterol — a healthy alternative to the high-fat, high-calorie pancakes. The U.S. Council for Agricultural Science and Technology said the nation’s favorite pancake was the non-nutritious white-sugar, high-fat version. But with natural, whole-grain products becoming more popular, sales of Bruce Foods’ sweet potato pancake mix are expected to soar.

"It’s an expensive pancake, but it’s worth it," Brown said.

Bruce Foods has enough confidence in the product to extend Bruce Foods sweet potato pancake mix to breakfast cereals in 2000.

"We have several items we’ll put on the market in the first quarter or early second quarter," Brown said.

In the course of developing Bruce’s Sweet Potato Pancake Mix, Brown purchased a fake Texas-style pancake mix at $2.50 for a 10-pack box.

"I never expected the sweet potato pancake mix to become a nationally sold product," Johnson said. "I’m thrilled Bruce Foods has given me the opportunity to share this recipe."

After a successful test run in Texas, Brown said the mix is ready for phase II of the marketing plan. It will now be sold in 14 states.

Bruce Foods won’t have much competition. It’s a unique product. In the United States, Bruce Foods is changing its pitch.

Bruce Foods, too, from the in-store demonstrations used to launch the product.

Bruce Foods is the first to bring the product to market through Dallas, New Orleans, Charleston, Houston, and San Antonio.

"It’s a new, innovative product, which we’ve never done before," Brown said. If the sweet potato pancake mix catches on, as Brown expects, Bruce Foods will have converted a seasonal farm product into a staple of the breakfast table every week. There’s nothing unusual about that.