

Earth Father

Having built a seven-cow farm into the world's largest producer of organic yogurt, **Gary Hirshberg** doesn't see any reason why he can't continue to save the planet one business at a time **BY JOCELYN C. ZUCKERMAN**

IN THE SPRING OF 1985, Andy Moes, a cohost of WROR Boston's popular *Joe and Andy* radio show, mentioned that he would be more inclined to eat camel manure than a bowl of yogurt. A few days later, 31-year-old Gary Hirshberg set out from the New Hampshire farmhouse-cum-yogurt-factory that he called home. After a quick detour to an attraction called Benson's Wild Animal Farm, he pulled up in front of the WROR studios. Moes was on the air when Hirshberg strode in and presented him with a pair of carefully packed plastic quart tubs. One was courtesy of the camels back at Benson's; the other held a sample of the all-natural product he and his friends were churning out up

north. Tens of thousands of listeners were on hand when Moes made the obvious choice.

Today, Hirshberg runs the biggest organic yogurt company in the world, and he doesn't have to resort to such unconventional ploys to get his product noticed. But that's not to say that Stonyfield Farm has gone conventional. Hirshberg chose "For a healthy planet" as the brand's motto in 1984, and he listed educating consumers about the value of protecting the environment and supporting family farmers among the goals in his company's mission statement. Stonyfield was the first dairy in the country to pay farmers not to use synthetic bovine growth hormone, and for the past ten years the company has



devoted 10 percent of its profits to environmental causes.

And that's not the half of it. Log on to the Stonyfield Web site and you'll find discussions of everything from global warming and genetically modified organisms to gun control and obesity, complete with hot links to government reports, pertinent *New Yorker* articles, and easily executed e-letters designed for direct deposit in your legislator's in-box. "It's hundreds of pages," Hirshberg acknowledges one afternoon in the living room of his comfortable New Hampshire home. "I'm afraid it sort of reflects my lunacy."

Call it what you will, Gary Hirshberg has a view of what he wants the world to be. With his very vocal and far-reaching activism, the 50-year-old is not unlike such antiestablishment baby boomers turned socially responsible entrepreneurs as ice cream gurus Ben Cohen and Jerry Greenfield. But unlike those two, who faded from view after economic realities forced them to partner with a corporate giant, Hirshberg is still very much the face of the Stonyfield brand—despite having sold 40 percent of the company to French food conglomerate Groupe Danone two years ago and an additional 40 percent this past January. He took plenty of heat from the organics community when he signed the Danone deal (which netted his family a reported \$35 million), but the agreement gave Hirshberg control of the Stonyfield board until 2016 (when Danone can acquire the remaining 20 percent of the company) and stipulated that, pending financial performance, he would enjoy nearly complete autonomy.

STILL, Hirshberg isn't simply sitting back and reveling in his success. Three years ago, he opened the first branch of O'Naturals, a chain of organic restaurants based in New England. He came up with the concept partly in response to what he sees as fast food's role in the nation's obesity epidemic and partly out of frustration stemming from a road trip that saw him and his three kids reduced to parking beneath the golden arches. "We were held hopelessly hostage," he says, "to the terrible choices that were out there."

Hirshberg describes O'Naturals as "a cross between Starbucks, Whole Foods, and McDonald's," and his aims for it are no less ambitious than those he has had for Stonyfield. The salads, stir-fries, and flatbread sandwiches incorporate ingredients (currently 30 percent of them organic) like bison raised on a Montana nature preserve and wild Alaskan salmon caught in a sustainably managed fishery. Instead of fries you'll find heirloom potatoes roasted with Maine-grown herbs, and instead of Coke or Pepsi there's microbrewed beer and organic tea. Tiny carrot icons point the way to vegan offerings, and meat-, gluten-, and dairy-phobic diners can choose from menus designed just for them.

Like the Stonyfield headquarters—where cardboard signs inform you that the birch-wood flooring comes from a sustainably managed forest and that the granite bathroom countertops are locally sourced and reclaimable—the O'Naturals restaurants wear their virtue on their sleeve. "Eco-discs" liberally scattered throughout the present three locations tout the fact that the paneling was constructed from post-harvest wheat chaff and the entryway mats from recycled aircraft tires. A sign in the all-wood play area of one implores, "Please, let's encourage our children to share."

Mac McCabe, the Harvard M.B.A. and former L.L.Bean executive who is the company president, says that its target market is what the industry refers to as the LOHAS (Lifestyles of

Health and Sustainability) consumer. The irony with these folks, he says, is that they shop in the supermarket for natural and organic products but lead hectic lives that force them to eat fast food. Frank Lampe, whose *LOHAS Journal* popularized the acronym, says that a full 27 percent of Americans (60 million people) fit this profile. These consumers, he explains, want more than a salad instead of a burger. "They're interested in the fact that the meat might be raised organically, that the food is organic, that the coffee is fair trade." Lampe adds that everything about O'Naturals speaks to the value system shared by this segment of the population.

Certainly people seem to like the place. This past March, the industry newspaper *Nation's Restaurant News* honored the chain with its "Hot Concepts!" award (sponsored, richly enough, by Tyson Foods), and, last October, *The Boston Globe's* Betsy Block gushed about the noodle dishes, chocolate cookies, and "simply delicious" steak sandwiches.

WITH SALES IN THE U.S. organics industry growing by more than 20 percent annually—as compared with 2 to 4 percent for total food sales—everyone from Heinz and General Mills to ConAgra and Archer Daniels Midland is jumping onto the organics bandwagon. But Hirshberg has been living this stuff for decades. It wasn't long after graduating from Hampshire College in 1976 that he went to work at the Massachusetts-based New Alchemy Institute, a nonprofit devoted to organic agriculture and renewable energy systems, and he only got into the yogurt business because his subsequent gig—a nonprofit called the Rural Education Center—was so chronically low on cash that he and his partner, Samuel Kaymen, took to hawking Kaymen's homemade version to keep from going under.

Hirshberg waxes nostalgic about those bad old days. You can't make it through one of his speaking engagements without hearing about the original seven cows, the \$25,000 loan from the Sisters of Mercy, and the endless months of milking and shelf stocking that went on in order to make ends meet. He and Kaymen hit up everyone they knew ("Anybody wearing a tie was fair game") in attempts to keep their business afloat. Particular crowd-pleasers in the story repertoire include the one about Hirshberg sneaking out of bed to call his mother-in-law and beg for another five grand only to be stymied by his wife, Meg, awake on the other line and beseeching Mom not to give in, and the saga about the night he and Kaymen drove home in a blizzard, brokenhearted after discovering that the deep-pocketed partners they'd been counting on to bring them some peace were nothing but a bunch of crooks.

The meager resources did have the benefit of forcing Hirshberg to get creative. For his 30th birthday (the Rural Education Center having given way by that point to the Stonyfield Farm yogurt company), the struggling entrepreneur told his friends that the only thing he wanted was for each of them to go down to the popular Cambridge grocery store he'd been trying to sell on his product and ask for Stonyfield by name. It's had a prime spot on the shelves ever since.

Hirshberg's guerrilla marketing tactics accelerated over the years, winning him publicity for his yogurt while providing him with a platform for airing the issues on his mind. When Boston subway riders were presented with free cups of yogurt, for example, they learned the Stonyfield name in addition to a lesson about the environmental pluses of riding mass transit. And though it famously backfired, the "Live Large,



CHAP CHAE

Korean-Style Noodles with Vegetables

Adapted from O'Naturals

SERVES 4

Active time: 35 min Start to finish: 35 min

- 5 to 6 oz very thin bean thread noodles (in small skeins, also known as cellophane, glass, or mung bean noodles; see Shopping List, page 238)**
- ½ cup tamari (wheat-free sauce from refined soy; see Shopping List, page 238)**
- 3 tablespoons Asian sesame oil**
- 3 tablespoons sugar**
- 1 tablespoon chopped garlic (2 cloves)**
- 1 tablespoon safflower oil**
- 1 medium onion, sliced lengthwise ½ inch thick (1½ cups)**
- 3 medium carrots, cut into ½-inch-thick matchsticks (2 inches long)**
- ¼ lb mushrooms, trimmed and sliced ½ inch thick (1½ cups)**
- 3 cups baby spinach (2½ oz)**

► Soak noodles in a bowl of warm water to cover until softened, about 10 minutes, then drain in a colander. Cook noodles in a 3- to 4-quart pot of boiling water until tender, about 2 minutes, then drain in a colander and rinse under cold water until cool.

► Blend tamari, sesame oil, sugar, and garlic in a blender until smooth.

► Heat safflower oil in a deep 12-inch heavy skillet over high heat until it just begins to smoke, then stir-fry onion and carrots until onion is softened, about 3 minutes. Add mushrooms and stir-fry until softened, about 3 minutes. Add spinach and stir-fry 30 seconds, then add noodles and tamari mixture and toss to coat. Simmer, stirring occasionally, until most of liquid is absorbed, 3 to 5 minutes. Transfer to a shallow serving dish and serve warm or at room temperature.

Cooks' note:

Chap chae can be made 1 day ahead and chilled, covered.

Drive Small" campaign, launched with the help of NPR's *Car Talk* brothers, had dinner parties everywhere debating the evils of SUVs and dropping the Stonyfield name.

Of course, not everyone found the antics amusing. It was while Hirshberg was running the gun-safety yogurt lids that one exasperated retailer finally dialed him up directly and blasted, "How dare you use my supermarket as your soapbox!"

In fact, there is something about Gary Hirshberg that smacks of the stumping politician. Not only is he a polished speaker, he's all about promoting an agenda. He masks neither his partisanship nor his blatant desire to move his own product. "We've got a moral imperative here," he'll say at the end of an impassioned rant, "but if we don't perform in those supermarkets ..." Or: "Do we stay on shelf? Do we sell through? This is what you can do."

Hirshberg is the first to admit that his goal in life is to make piles and piles of money. And that in order for him to make a difference in the world, he *does* need you to buy his yogurt and eat in his restaurants. At the root of this seemingly contorted personal philosophy is a field trip he made some 20 years ago to a Kraft food exhibit then on display at Disney's Epcot Center. At the time, Hirshberg and his New Alchemy friends were working on an all-natural solar growing environment that yielded enough food to feed ten people three meals a day throughout the year. Down in Florida, however, Hirshberg was confronted with a different agricultural model. "This was a fossil-fuel-heated-and-cooled, pesticide-, herbicide-, chemical-fertilizer-laden environment where basically the message was, 'You buy the Velveeta, and leave the growing to us.'" He remembers calculating that New Alchemy saw 25,000 visitors in a year, and that every day that many people paid to walk through Disney's exhibit. "I realized right then and there," he says, "that I needed to become Kraft."

"We started Stonyfield," he continues, "with the idea that business is probably the most powerful force on the planet,

and that business must make the planet and sustainability its priority in order for our children to have any future. We started Stonyfield with the idea that we need to take over commerce, like Trojan horses, and enter it."

NOW, OF COURSE, Hirshberg is looking to become the Kraft of the fast-food world. (In fact, his yogurt company succeeded last year in overtaking Kraft's Breyers brand.) He intends to add a fourth O'Naturals location (there are currently branches in Falmouth and Portland, Maine, and in Acton, Massachusetts) in the next few months, and to have his franchise plan in place soon after. Five years from now, Hirshberg hopes to see some 150 outlets—"wherever there's a Whole Foods, a Wild Oats, or a Trader Joe's, at least in the Northeast and the West"—and he has said that his ultimate goal is to have one O'Naturals for every McDonald's in the nation.

The sheer ambition of the plan is one thing, but even more interesting is how Hirshberg thinks he can pull this off without becoming exactly what he's set out to destroy. Won't a 15,000-strong franchise operation—whose magnitude alone conjures words like *corporate* and *industrial*—inevitably bring along with it everything Gary Hirshberg despises?

He says the answer is no, emphasizing that he has every intention of sourcing locally and continuing to work with family farmers. Even if he is forced for efficiency's sake to team up with mass-scale organic farms, Hirshberg says, that will at least have the benefit of gradually ridding our soil, air, and water of industrial toxins. He will defend the fossil fuel involved in hauling ingredients across the country (say what you will, sourcing locally for a New England-based, vegetarian-inclined restaurant in the middle of January is going to present some challenges), trotting out statistics from a study he conducted back at the Rural Education Center, and he's happy to speculate about what will happen when he gets bought out by a socially oblivious megacorporation. Look at

the Danone deal, he says, which not only yielded benefits in terms of marketing and purchasing but also resulted in his parent company implementing organic initiatives overseas.

According to Hirshberg, the key to the whole changing-big-business-from-within model (one that is increasingly being embraced by such entrepreneurs as Whole Foods founder John Mackey and White Wave president Steve Demos) is customer loyalty. "If what you're standing for is honest and true, and if you're beautiful and healthy in what you're doing, you create the holy grail of consumerism. When someone buys your product and is pleased, they aren't ever gonna go back."

Customer loyalty is something Hirshberg knows a little bit about. Stonyfield fans don't just buy yogurt—they look to the brand's Web site for everything from dessert recipes to advice on buying a car, and for the past five months they've communicated with one another via five Stonyfield-run blogs. How many other companies could announce something called a Strong Women Summit (to "celebrate, educate, and motivate women about good health, nutrition, exercise, and attitude") and have 24,000 people respond? (Held last November in New Paltz, New York, and featuring such speakers as Erin Brock-

Hirshberg's own driveway is home to a Honda SUV and a Mazda minivan (with "YOGURT" plates), but other than that and the Sub-Zero fridge in his kitchen, this millionaire's footprint appears to have remained pretty small. The house he built himself ten years ago is roomy but modest, and the décor runs to homey ceramics and mid-range Oriental rugs.

"We're country mice," says Hirshberg, looking out over the wooded view from the third-floor office he works from once a week. In this room, as elsewhere, the most prominent design elements are the photos of the kids and the collages he's made for Meg to commemorate every year of their marriage. All of which suggests that when this ardent capitalist talks about his product being "beautiful and healthy and true," he just may be sincere. This is a man, after all, whose official bio begins, "Gary Hirshberg is the husband of Meg Hirshberg," and whose business cards (printed on 100 percent recycled paper with vegetable-based inks) do double duty as expiration-proof coupons for a free cup of yogurt. Whose own voice soothes from the other end of the line when you call the headquarters of his \$150 million company (he hates waiting on hold, too), and whose business letterhead is

He describes his O'Naturals chain of organic restaurants as "a cross between Starbucks, Whole Foods, and McDonald's."

ovich and the first woman to run the Boston Marathon, the gathering was so successful that it is now an established event, to be held multiple times a year in locations across the country.)

Hirshberg himself is a big part of the draw. Measuring in at a stocky 5' 8", he exudes a sort of schoolboy charm, helped along by the turtlenecks and beat-up Adidas, the raspy earnestness, and the combination of antiestablishment rebel ("These were the days when, unlike our former president, most of us were not exhaling") and unrepentant cornball (best evidenced by the frequent references to his "favorite philosopher, Lily Tomlin").

Cathleen Toomey, vice president of communications for Stonyfield, says that Hirshberg came up with the Strong Women concept because "he believes we need more female leadership." But surely there is more. Women do most of the grocery shopping in this country, and women generally decide where to take the kids for a quick bite. "He's more business-savvy than I think a lot of people give him credit for," says Miriam Nelson, associate professor of nutrition at Tufts University and Hirshberg's cofounder on the summits.

It's no coincidence, for example, that the company increasingly touts the calcium-absorption-enhancing qualities of its yogurts or that the new packaging on the children's line is so bright and colorful it fairly screams from the shelf.

"I'm not at all ashamed or embarrassed," says Hirshberg, "by anything we've done to reshape our product and our message into forms that are more palatable to the public. I think that capitalism is very charismatic," he continues, "and I think that environmentalists, if they're too proud to engage in this stuff, are going to be outshone by more appealing visions. I mean, Hummer sales aren't about functionality. It's about sex appeal. But the hip, chic thing to do could be to have the lowest ecological footprint, even to the point of where you make fun of this absurd, you know, Arnold Schwarzenegger car."

peppered with such workplace priorities as "Awesome Yogurt," "Customer Bliss," and just plain "Believing."

Documentarian Ken Burns, who was at Hampshire with Hirshberg, says that his classmate's "absolutely irresistible insouciance" was apparent even back then. "We filmmakers were always buried in the basement of the library, pasty-faced, angst-ridden, and filled with existential questions," says Burns, "and Gary just didn't seem to suffer from those things."

After the loss three years ago of two younger brothers and a recent bout of breast cancer suffered by Meg, Hirshberg has a little more angst these days, but the confrontations with mortality have only served to fuel his fire. In the past year alone, he's launched an ambitious program to provide healthy vending machines to public schools and spearheaded scores of other earth-friendly initiatives with partners like Alice Waters, the Chefs Collaborative, and the Environmental Working Group.

WHETHER THEY AGREE with Hirshberg's vision or not ("I hope Gary is really, really successful," says *Fast Food Nation* author Eric Schlosser, "and that there are never 15,000 O'Naturals"), the people who know him say that if anybody can pull this thing off, Hirshberg can.

"He's a pretty formidable little guy," says Tufts' Nelson.

He's also determined.

"Gary is just someone who is not going to take no for an answer," says Burns, "who is always sure that tomorrow is going to be better than today."

"I may be pathologically optimistic," Hirshberg concedes. "I'll be the first to admit it. But people said Stonyfield was impossible. People said the organic movement was impossible. People said O'Naturals was impossible ..."

Actually, they're still saying that. Only now they don't sound so convinced. ☺