



Chicago Section
Institute of Food Technologists



the First Section

Know Your Emeritus Member: Orlan Jennings



My introduction to food science came from Dr. Paul Buck, my advisor at Cornell University. Although intending to be a veterinarian, an undergraduate major was necessary and after meeting Dr. Buck, I took his Food Science 101 survey course. Feeling drawn to the science of food, I changed my career goals and graduated in 1966 with a BS in Food Science.

My first several jobs were with companies that now exist only as brands, but I worked on some amazing products, including candy (Standard Brands in Connecticut, which owned Baby Ruth, Butterfingers and Planters), seasonings and MSG (Accent International in Skokie, IL) and canned meat (Underwood Deviled Ham in Boston). My first product development project to go national was Underwood roast beef spread.

A few years at Burger King, as a Manager of Menu Development in Miami, gave me a good background in QSR restaurants, with a company and job I really loved. My position allowed me to develop new sandwiches and do some very creative work that changed the way BK was handling sandwiches.

As Miami was not a very family friendly town in those days (heavy violence and drugs), we moved to Minneapolis and small division of Beatrice that made ice cream toppings. As Manager of R&D, New Concepts, my job was to broaden the company line into areas other than toppings and again, several new products I developed created new markets for my company. During my spare time, I got an MBA, which gave me a better grounding in how marketing and finance worked.

Beatrice merged my company into the Hunt Wesson division of Beatrice in Fullerton, California and this meant a transfer. Hunt Wesson was my first taste of a large company R&D department exposure to a wide variety of products and interaction with my peers in the department. As you may know, all these Beatrice divisions are now under the Con-Agra brand.

After a few years, I returned to food service as Director of R&D for Shoney's restaurants in Nashville, TN. At that time, Shoney's had five divisions, Shoney's (family style), Captain D's (fried fish), Lee's Famous (fried chicken), Fifth Quarter (white tablecloth steakhouse), and Pargo's (casual dining similar to Ruby Tuesday or Applebee's). This was a great opportunity to get experience in a wide variety of food service genres and I loved working the various divisions. Where else could you have a job that nearly every food you can imagine would be potential for at least one of the restaurant concepts? A typical day could include King Crab legs as well as Southern Biscuits.



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A restructuring at Shoney's left me on the outside and out of work for over 18 months. During that time, I formed a product development consulting practice. Although loving the work and interacting with clients, I did not like the constant marketing and sales job needed to sustain a consultancy. However, it did keep me going for those months and I value the experience. After finding a job as Director of R&D at Perdue Farms (Salisbury, MD), I was managing a wonderful group of R&D professionals and learning a lot of what it takes to process over 1 million chickens a day and what to do with the meat. My position was to manage the group responsible for developing retail prepared chicken products.

My time at Perdue was short and I joined a small company that developed seasonings for the food service and meat: Georgia Spice in Atlanta. Overall, my preference is smaller companies that allow a greater opportunity to experience the entire company line rather than one or two specific products. At Georgia Spice, as Manager of R&D, I learned spice blending, and my previous experience in food service helped a great deal in working with the restaurant and industry customers.

A few years later, I moved on to take charge of Seasoning R&D at Mane Flavors in Cincinnati. My work assisted the company in growing their seasoning business as well as installing a new formula management system, and learning about flavors and flavor development. I stayed with Mane for 8 years, the longest tenure in my career. From Mane, I moved to Sara Lee in Downers Grove, IL (now Hillshire Brands) to be of all things, an independent contributor in the Jimmy Dean area, and working with sausage and breakfast sandwiches. Sara Lee was the culmination of my career and one of the best companies in my career with good supervision, and a great group of peers. In addition, SL had a true dual ladder program and rewarded their scientists.

At SL, I realized that my true interest was in "playing with the food" at the bench top level, leading projects that accomplished real results for the company and seeing those results implemented and celebrated by the company. For all the years spent managing and directing R&D departments, I loved going back to the science level as the last job in my career. SL was looking for people with varied backgrounds as opposed to pure Meat Scientists (I think the specification fit me fairly well). My final project with Sara Lee was to develop a fully cooked beef patty, sold frozen under the Ball Park label. After delaying my retirement to finish that project, I have followed its successful introduction and growth. Traveling around the country, it gives me great pleasure to visit groceries around the country and see my product in the freezer section.

I also joined the IFT and maintained membership over my career starting with the Nutmeg Section in Connecticut as it was forming. I was active in the Miami, Minneapolis, and Cincinnati Sections while I worked those cities, serving on the Harold Macy award committee in Minneapolis and treasurer for the Cincinnati section. The IFT was my prime source of information and contacts early in my career. In addition, as time went on, returning some of that to my fellow members.

As you can tell, I spent a lot of time moving and, except for Cincinnati with Mane Flavors, never spent more than 5 years in any location in my entire life (including youth). My wife has a similar history, growing up in a military family. Upon retirement, my wife and I sold our house and most of the 'things'



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in our life and live full time in a 40 foot motorhome traveling around the country. The longest we stay in any place is in Texas for the winter, a whole 5 months. The rest of the time we travel, visiting wonderful places all over our great country. My family is spread around the country (and world with a son in China) so we have family and friends in many areas.

My career may be an exception to the rule, but the varied career was much more satisfying to me than staying in one area of the food industry. Although knowing many people who stayed in one area and became industry experts (and loved that position), it was not for me. In my case, I was able to profit from the wide and varied experiences in food that I gained, using knowledge from one arena in a new area.

My advice to any young person in the food science area today it would be to 1) gain as much varied experience you can in your early years, and try to specialize in your later years, but keep your options open. Although I intended to spend the end of my career in seasoning and spice blending, my switch to Sara Lee was a great decision. 2) Keep up with the contacts you make during your career. Knowing people to go to for knowledge and advice is a great adjunct to your own work.