



Messenger photo by John Halley

Jonathan Leal's Athens business has won a governor's export award.

Local biz wins export award

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An Athens business described by its founder as a "one-man band" has achieved something most Ohio businesses only aspire to do.

Milo's Whole World Gourmet, maker of the Vino de Milo line of wine-based speciality foods, is one of only 20 Ohio companies to be recognized with the 2010 Governor's Award for Excellence in Exporting.

Award recipients this year included aerospace companies and industrial manufacturers. Milo's was the only food company and one of only two companies in the entire southeastern quadrant of Ohio to be named as a winner. The other was the Columbus

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Washboard Co. in Logan.

Vino de Milo products include pasta sauces, salad dressings and bruschetta topping. The company exports products to Japan, Canada and Kuwait, and soon to Great Britain.

Founder Jonathan Milo Leal said the company's export business has grown each year since it's founding in 2003. In 2009, export sales made up 20 percent of the company's business.

On Friday, Leal talked about his expanding company and the reasons it won the award.

"It's a great award, and we're really thrilled to have received it," Leal said. "I was really surprised to learn we were the only food company to win. There are so many big food companies — really huge companies, like Smucker's — in Ohio, so it was a big thrill and a surprise."

Leal said representatives from the other winning companies were surprised at the level of success a company with one employee has achieved. He said it's the support he receives from the Appalachian Center for Economic Networks that has allowed the company to grow and compete with companies that are a lot larger.

"We wouldn't be here except for ACENet," Leal said. "Without their capacity and flexibility we wouldn't have the ability to support our export market. ACENet has been a big supporter of us. (During the awards ceremony) they asked how many employees we have — and these are companies with 300 and 1,000 employees — and I said 'One.' There was a guy behind me and he said, 'Oh, wow.' These are companies that have export sales managers, but I said Milo's is a one-man band. It takes a lot of good people around you to support you when you need it, and that's what ACENet does."

Leal attributes his international sales to two things — assistance from Ohio trade offices and his persistence in going after foreign customers.

"We've been exporting for several years, and we first found export customers with help from the state of Ohio's 11 trade offices," Leal said. "The trade offices will find customers for you — they will introduce them to your products, but you take it from there. They found three (potential) customers in Japan, and one turned into a customer. I go to trade shows, which I call speed dating. You set up your products there and in the course of a day you can have 30 half-hour meetings. If you get one customer out of 100 you're doing good. That's how we got started in Kuwait and Canada."

Leal said success in the export trade depends on tried-and-true business tools.

"It's the result of two things — relentless follow-up and attention to detail," he said. "The attention to detail is especially important with Japanese customers.

Details have to be perfect. The trade office says if you can sell to Japan you can sell anywhere. They are the strictest of any customers. The label has to be perfectly straight. There cannot be a spec of anything on the outside. (Box packaging) has to be perfect."

His first international customer was in Canada, followed by Japan. He said the success in selling to Japanese customers during its current economic recession is one of the reasons Milo's won the award. He said award contenders are judged on their challenges, and Japan's troubled economy presents a huge challenge.

"Japan is having an even worse time with their economy than the U.S. They are in a major recession," Leal said.

The company's ability to adapt is another key to its success in foreign markets. They learned one Japanese customer was thinking of dropping their products because store shelves in Japan are shorter and the height of some products was a problem. The company moved quickly and provided a smaller jar that would fit Japanese shelves.

"That saved our Japanese market — our ability to be flexible and our ability to work with customers to find what they need," Leal said. "We meet buyers all the time (and adjust), where bigger companies say 'Here is what we have — take it or leave it.' We have the ability to say 'Tell us what do you need, and we'll make it.' That was a big factor in keeping business and in winning the award — and the fact that I don't ever give up. You have to bite hard and never let go."

Milo's has gone as far as altering product ingredients to sell in one country.

"We had to make a change for Kuwait," Leal said. "We had to leave out the wine and take off any reference to wine or the label — and that's hard to do when your name is Vino de Milo. We customized the label, in addition to the ingredients, and use 'Food Choice,' for the company name and brand name."

Leal earned a master's of arts in French at Ohio University, and that allowed him to translate label information for French-speaking Canadian customers.

Leal said he hopes to complete work soon to sell products in Mexico. He said it takes a year's work to move into a new country.

"It takes an enormous amount of work," he said. "Everything takes a lot more work than you would think. It takes a lot of patience, a lot of persistence."

Vino de Milo's products are created in small batches and made with all-natural ingredients and fresh herbs. Most ingredients are sourced in Ohio. The company produces five wine-based pasta sauces, seven wine-based salad dressings and three wine-based bruschetta toppings.

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