

SAVOR OF NATURE



NATALIE GUILLEN — Staff

GIL PRITCHARD, president and chief executive of San Leandro's nSpired Natural Foods, talks with employees Nacho Alcalá (left) and Louie Gonzalez.

nSpired proves healthy business

■ Company offers tasty food for restricted diets

By Janis Mara
BUSINESS WRITER

SAN LEANDRO'S nSpired Natural Foods hopes to rescue Americans on restricted diets from "the taste penalty box."

The company, a melting pot of six health food companies united in

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Gil Pritchard, nSpired CEO

2000, caters to people with diabetes, lactose intolerance and celiac disease as well as those who limit their diets,

such as vegetarians.

"There are about 17 million people with diabetes, 30 to 50 million with lactose intolerance and a huge number of celiacs in the United States," said Gil Pritchard, president and chief executive of nSpired. "They have all these negatives to deal with — you can't eat this, you can't eat that."

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Bay Area home of many health food companies

► **FOODS**, from Business 1

"We want to provide them something positive, options that taste good and aren't too expensive," said Pritchard, who took the 5-year-old company's helm in June 2001.

Apparently, nSpired is doing well by doing good: revenues are up 23 percent in the first quarter of 2003 over those in the first quarter of 2002, and the company pulled in \$50 million in revenues for 2002 overall.

nSpired is only one of many health food companies in the Bay Area, which is a hotbed of such firms, no doubt as a legacy from the crunchy-granola 1960s. For example, well-known firms such as Odwalla, now owned by Coca-Cola, began here, and two energy bar giants, Clif Bar and Power Bar (now owned by Nestlé) started in Berkeley.

products might be described as "health food junk food," chocolate bars and bulk chocolate products in a variety of relatively healthy forms, including gluten-free for those with celiac disease, alternatively sweetened for diabetics, and dairy-free for vegans.

"Tropical Source, one of our chocolate bars, is made in Israel in one of the only plants in the world where no dairy or gluten in any kind has ever been used," said Robin Robinson, the company's vice president of marketing.

Other lines include the seemingly oxymoronic Skinny Chips brand, which is tortilla and corn chips with reduced amounts of fat for dieters.

"If these chips do have less calories



GIL PRITCHARD, president and chief executive of San Leandro's nSpired Natural Foods, holds a box of Cool Fruits frozen fruit pops.

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and you can eat less for your points, then great," said Linda Webb Carilli, a registered dietitian and spokeswoman for Weight Watchers International. "What it really comes down to is saving calories because it's less fat."

The company also sells Loriva oils, a yuppie's delight of flavored oils including avocado, garlic and hot pepper-flavored oils.

"This is ideal for non-cooks who

want to make a contribution to a dinner party, for example. Instead of using olive oil for dipping your bread, you can use our toasted sesame oil or garlic-flavored oil," said Pritchard.

nSpired's final line is Maranatha nuts and nut butters, a long-established Bay Area health food line that

was one of the companies bought by entrepreneur Eric Zitelli between 1998 and 2000 to establish the company. Maranatha was the platform to which the other companies were added.

After putting together the company, Zitelli handed the reins to Pritchard in 2001 "to bring it to the next level," Pritchard said. It was Pritchard's idea to formalize the marketing of the eclectic collection of health food lines to people

with restricted diets.

Pritchard came to nSpired from Barbara's Bakery in Petaluma, where he was president and CEO for 15 years.

About 15 people work at nSpired's San Leandro headquarters, which includes a 35,000-square-foot warehouse where the foods are distributed. The company also has a Fresno manufacturing facility. The Maranatha line is created in Ashland, Ore.

Pritchard said he has high hopes for the future, given the growth nSpired has already accomplished.

"We're into organic growth, which means nurturing the products you have to their full potential. We just have to make the people who need our products aware that they're here," he said.

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