

SportsCar

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BY ROCKY ENTRIEN PHOTOS COURTESY DEREK WYMAN

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FOR DEREK WYMAN, ENJOYING THE THRILLS OF AUTOCROSS IS SOMETHING THAT COMES NATURALLY

The good news is that eating healthy is becoming easier. And that makes Derek Wyman's job not only easier but more rewarding.

Wyman is a sales supervisor for Tree of Life, a wholesale distributor of natural and organic food, plus lines of gourmet and specialty items.

"I've been with them 11 years," says Wyman. "When I started it was a very small group of customers looking for very specific things. Slowly but surely it has become almost mainstream."

"There are a lot of people buying [organic foods] not because it's natural or organic but because it's good. Someone making a sauce who tries organic tomatoes will never go back to other tomatoes because it tastes better."

Tree of Life began in 1969 as a department of a neighborhood grocer near St. Augustine, Fla. Today it distributes more than 55,000 food products nationwide as a business bought out in 1985 by Royal Wessanen, a Dutch company specializing in global marketing of organic foods which traces its history back to the mid-18th century.

Wyman, who lives in Rome, N.Y., travels more than 40,000 miles through mostly upstate New York on his job servicing about 150 accounts. He is in line to step up to a district manager position in 2007.

"The thing with organic foods that a lot of people don't understand," he says, "all it means is it is not processed, not grown with pesticides. A pumpkin pie is a pumpkin pie, not made out of soy or cardboard."

"At first there was a lot of stuff that was good for you but not necessarily pleasing to the palate. That was an impression we had to overcome. It's not moldy tofu any more."

With greater acceptance comes greater sales. With



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greater sales comes more competitive pricing, which leads to greater acceptance – a cycle that pleases sales people like Wyman immensely.

"Take cereal – five years ago you look at what we were selling and they were twice as expensive as a box of Kellogg's or Post. You go into the store now, a brand like Kashi is at or lower than the national brands."

"Once you can get your price down to compete with major manufacturers, everything else becomes simpler."

But the basic truth about selling organic foods is no different than what succeeds for any foods, Wyman says.

"Yes, it's good, it's healthy, but the thing that pushes the product is taste. It is, after all, food. No matter how much the box tells you you should be doing something, it comes down to taste."

"One of the ways our product lines move into the mainstream is when we can put a product out there that tastes good. Annie's Homegrown mac and cheese, the product is all natural yet, to the consumer, it is a box of macaroni and cheese that the kids will eat, but unlike Kraft or Velveeta it is not loaded up with all the artificial stuff."

"It's a lot easier to sell a consumer on a product that tastes good than it is to sell them on the idea that it's good for you."

While Tree of Life makes some products under its own brand name, Wyman said 99 percent of its business is other companies' products.

"In natural and organic specifically, we are the market maker," he says. "If we are not pushing your product, it is much harder."

And oddly, success is when Tree of Life loses the business because the product grows strong enough not to need a contract distributor. Snapple was such a product line, Wyman says, which began in 1972 as a natural apple drink made in Rye Brook, N.Y. Eventually it became a such big seller that Quaker Oats snapped it up. Today it's owned by Schweppes.

"We'll bring a product to market when it's small," Wyman explains. "Our greatest success is when we lose the product. There is a necessity to reinvent [the Tree of Life product line] because the most successful products we have will move on. It changes daily, things come and go, fads come and go, categories take off or die."

"Which is what makes the job endlessly more interesting."

Every week I have new items, new categories. It is a lot easier to go to customers and be excited about it when you're really excited."

On weekends, never mind all the miles he spends on the road during the week, Wyman runs up more mileage traveling to SCCA Solo events in his CG

Lock-sponsored STS class Plymouth Neon. Often he shares the ride with teammate Michael Occhipinti, who ran it to fifth in class at the most recent Solo Nationals. They've been friends since Occhipinti lived in Rochester, N.Y., while attending the Rochester Institute of Technology.

"He's a helluva driver who was looking for a car to be competitive in. For the first few years he was the tire warmer because it is my car," Wyman says, although the roles have since changed. "He got a job with an auto supplier in Michigan. For whatever reason, our partnership has continued."

Wyman missed the Nationals. But his car didn't. "The car was perfect. It was

FAST FACTS

- SCCA REGION: Southern New York
- MEMBER SINCE: 2001
- FAVORITE AUTHOR: Ralph Waldo Emerson
- LAST BOOK READ: *I and Thou*, by Martin Buber
- FAVORITE ENTERTAINER: Bruce Springsteen
- FAVORITE MOVIE: *Vertigo*
- FAVORITE TV SHOW: *Mythbusters*
- FAVORITE FOOD: Real New York pizza
- FIRST CAR OWNED: 1979 Toyota Corolla
- FAVORITE CAR OWNED: 1980 BMW 528i
- CURRENT DAILY DRIVER: 2004 Mitsubishi Lancer Ralliart
- FAVORITE RACE DRIVER: E Stuck autocrosser Nick Flynn

DEREK WYMAN

Derek Wyman often shares his STS Neon with teammate Michael Occhipinti, who took the car to Topeka for the 2006 Nationals.



only beaten twice all year, and once was Nationals," says Wyman. "It was impossible to keep [Occhipinti] away from Topeka. We found him a co-driver and found a way to get the car there, and I got to sit at my desk and watch the computer for two days waiting for results. It was a totally miserable experience."

More fun for Wyman was the Canadian Autoslam Championships, where he ran second to Occhipinti in a 1-2 finish.

"Canada was a blast. They really put on a fantastic event. That was supposed to be our consolation prize for not going to Topeka this year," he says.

"When I got into [Solo] I was, 'Go all the way or do not do it.' Now, young drivers who would like to go to the next step look and see people with endless amounts of disposable income. One thing I try to do is encourage them to run National events, see how they do. Not everyone who wins has seven, eight, nine figures in the bank."

