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Pride of ownership: Jumbo Foods gives employees vested interest

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Pat Blevins, left, and Gerald Blevins stand in the produce section at Jumbo Foods in Enid. (Photo by Bonnie Vculek)

ENID – Three years ago, Jumbo Foods of Enid became employee-owned through an ESOP – employee stock ownership plan.

Now the company has about 320 employees in Enid operating two large supermarkets and a franchise Save-A-Lot store.

Employees become fully vested in the ESOP after six years, said Gerald Blevins, vice president.

“It gives our employees a chance to have a retirement plan,” he said. “It makes every one of our vested employees an owner.”

Being employee-owned has made a difference, said Pat Blevins, Jumbo president and founder and father of Gerald Blevins.

“We have seen a big difference in retention and work ethic from our employees,” Pat Blevins said.

Having an ESOP with workers in the community helps Jumbo Foods put an emphasis on customer service.

“We have an advantage in Enid,” Pat Blevins said. “Our customers are our friends.”

Jumbo Foods’ main competitors in Enid include a Walmart Supercenter; United Supermarkets, which has two of its 21 stores in Oklahoma in Enid; and Aldi, a discount grocery chain similar to Save-A-Lot.

“One of the things that has kept us competitive is doing some of the things the big chains and Walmart do not do,” Gerald Blevins said. “We cut our fresh meet daily.”

Jumbo purchased the Save-A-Lot store in Enid this spring to complement its two much larger stores. The Save-A-Lot store is at 917 E. Broadway in the center of Enid while the two larger stores are at 221 S. 30th on the east side of town and at 2311 W. Willow on the west side.

“Save-A-Lot is a different concept and we have learned a lot from it,” Gerald Blevins said.

The discount-format Save-A-Lot has a much smaller selection of items than the much larger traditional supermarkets operated by Jumbo Foods.

“We have 60,000 items at our west store,” Pat Blevins said.

Being locally owned helps Jumbo respond to customer requests for certain items, including a lot of food items produced in Oklahoma, said Jim Stafford, manager-buyer.

“If a customer wants a particular product we try to get it,” Gerald Blevins said. “We can make a decision on the spot.”

That includes local products that often have a hard time getting shelf space at chain stores.

“Local people bring us honey and pickles,” Stafford said. “Anything we can buy locally, we have it.”

Jumbo’s merchandise includes numerous items from the Made-In-Oklahoma program operated by the Oklahoma Department of Agriculture, Food & Forestry.

Head Country Bar-B-Q Sauce, made by Ponca City-based Head Country Food Products, is one of the best-selling items at Jumbo Foods.

“We buy Head Country by the truckloads,” said Pat Blevins, who has worked in the grocery industry for more than 45 years, including some time at United Supermarkets, now a Jumbo competitor.

“I worked for United Supermarkets for 27 years,” he said.

Pat Blevins started Jumbo Foods as a family business in 1987.

“It has been a lot of work, but it has been worth it,” Gerald Blevins said.