



NEW LOOK: Abe's directors Megan Sargent and Brent Milburn had to redesign their packaging to match competitors.

PICTURE / BRETT PHIBBS

Abe's grabs slice of Aussie market

Bagel maker signs deal with Woolworths to put crisps on supermarket shelves

by Eloise Gibson

Kiwi-made bagel crisps will be on Australian supermarket shelves from January, after Auckland company Abe's won a contract to supply 700 Woolworths Australia stores.

Owners Megan Sargent and Brent Milburn said it had taken them 11 months, four trips across the Tasman and a lot of tinkering with the product to strike a deal. To meet the grocery giant's criteria, the pair had to redesign the packaging of their bagel crisps to match smaller-sized competitors as well as change their delivery arrangements.

"They just kept throwing us hurdles, and we kept doing what we needed to do to get over them," said Sargent.

Sargent and Milburn started what is now Abe's Real Food Company a

decade ago. Its first incarnation was a bagel bakery and cafe in downtown Auckland.

In 2000, the pair sold the cafe to concentrate on supplying bagels wholesale to supermarkets.

They began making bagel crisps in 1999, thinly slicing bagels and baking them in oil to give them a longer shelf-life. At first, the bagels were hand-sliced with a bacon slicer, but frustration at this slow method led Milburn to come up with his own slicing machine.

"There was no machine to slice bagels with commercially," he said. "We had two people slicing by hand in a small room. We could make 300 packets a day, and that was the most we could do."

Milburn, a qualified engineer, said his slicing machine gave the company

its competitive edge, one he was keen to protect. "We throw rugs over [the machine] when people come through the factory," he said.

The bagel factory will need to be extended and staffed with 10 extra

who does the company's marketing, is to make sure the crisps sell on the Australian market.

There are at least two similar items already on shelves.

Given the rivalry between the two countries, Sargent said getting Australians to buy New Zealand-made bagel crisps could be a challenge.

"What we need to do is get the product in people's mouths, because once they try it they usually like it," she said.

Sargent said New Zealand would remain the company's largest market, at least in the short term.

"[Australia] has five times the population we do, but we will probably sell half what we sell in New Zealand in the first year, because we've developed a market here."

"They just kept throwing us hurdles, and we kept doing what we needed to do to get over them."

Megan Sargent

people to cope with the Australian contract. The new recruits will take staff numbers up to about 50.

"We'll need a bigger boat for the Christmas party," said Milburn.

The next challenge for Sargent,