

# How this protein bar brand grew 57,000% in three years

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Quest currently offers 18 protein bar varieties.

EL SEGUNDO, CALIF. — Quest Nutrition grew 57,347% in its first three years, but the protein bar maker still has a long road ahead in its mission to end obesity.

“You have to look at us through a longer lens,” said Tom Bilyeu, co-founder and president of Quest, in an interview with *Food Business News*. “We expect it’s going to take approximately 25 years to really make the changes to the food supply that we need to make to really end metabolic disease.”

Last year, *Inc.* named El Segundo-based Quest the second fastest growing private company in North America. The brand had \$82.6 million in revenues in 2013.



Tom Bilyeu, co-founder and president of Quest

“And we continue to grow in significant triple digits year-over-year since then,” Mr. Bilyeu said. “Our growth rate continues to astonish even us. The one question people ask us a lot is, ‘Did you ever expect it to be this big?’ The answer’s yes. We expected it to be this big, just not this fast.”

The brand’s first protein bars were made five years ago in a small kitchen with rolling pins and hand-held knives. As products began generating buzz in the health and fitness community, the company researched how to manufacture on a larger scale. But to maintain texture without changing the formulations, Quest had to develop custom equipment.

“Keeping the ingredient label clean is difficult once you factor in manufacturing because manufacturing has grown up over the last 60 years with a food industry that has been using high-fructose corn syrup, it makes any product

it’s in, quite frankly, really soft and pliable, even when under pressure, which is why it’s everywhere” Mr. Bilyeu said. “We don’t use high-fructose corn syrup; we don’t take the easy route. The thing that we are most proud of is that we have gotten involved in engineering our own equipment. Where we buy things off the shelf, we have modified it. We have a whole team of engineers that have helped bring this stuff to reality.”

Quest currently offers 18 protein bar varieties, including chocolate chip cookie dough, s’mores, white chocolate raspberry, cinnamon roll and strawberry cheesecake. Last year, the company launched high-protein potato chips, made with whey- and milk-based protein, in sea salt, barbecue, cheddar and sour cream, and sour cream and onion varieties. A few months later, the brand expanded again with a range of protein powders, featuring such flavors as vanilla, chocolate, peanut butter and strawberries and cream.

“The powders are super versatile,” Mr. Bilyeu said. “You can put it in a shaker bottle and consume it post-workout, just like any typical shake, but you can also just turn them into a whole host of things... We have a cookbook coming out featuring a lot of the stuff we have been working on for a really long time that shows people all the crazy cool ways you can use the powder.”

At the end of September, the brand unveiled its first-ever seasonal launch, a pumpkin pie protein bar with a graham cracker crust and a creamy pumpkin coating. Mr. Bilyeu said Quest’s consumers have requested the flavor for years.



Quest recently unveiled its first-ever seasonal launch, a pumpkin pie protein bar.

"It's a completely new kind of bar that's unlike anything our fans have seen before," he said.

A key part of innovation at Quest is identifying the types of foods linked with obesity.

"If we can make a truly healthy version — not a better-for-you version, which is a really important distinction, of these foods that get these people in metabolic trouble, then we've really got something," Mr. Bilyeu said. "Ending metabolic disease drives us."

Read on to learn the secrets behind Quest's sensational growth.

### ***Food Business News: How does product development work at Quest?***

**Tom Bilyeu:** We have a really large R.&D. department. We've got over 40 people on staff full time who do nothing but try to create new flavors and product lines. We really believe in the power of the new mind, so when you look at people who have longstanding historical knowledge and formal training, that experience comes to bear in really powerful ways, but there's also the power of somebody who has naiveté of a beginner. They don't know what's impossible. They have no sense of limitation because they're just making it up as they go.

We have this wonderful blend of food scientists and people who have nothing but just raw passion for great nutrition, and so they go in and they experiment together and play together and try to really surprise themselves and not necessarily think outside the box ... but they try to find new boxes to think within. And that's something that's driven a lot of our R.&D. And the process itself starts with, what are those food items that get people in trouble?

If you look at any one of our protein bars, just as an example, we'll do a thousand variations. I'm not kidding, by the way. That's not a made-up number. Literally a thousand variations to get a single new flavor. Just going through all the different amounts and ingredients and ratios to get the macro profile that people are used to and to get the flavor perfect.

**You use primarily whey protein and milk protein isolates. Have you considered using other sources of protein for those who are sensitive to dairy?**

**Mr. Bilyeu:** No question. And we really feel like when we look at the problem we are trying to solve with metabolic disease, we are in our infancy. There are so many more things we're going to have to deliver, and that's really our promise to the customer.

Not only do we need to continue to experiment with other proteins, but there's a whole host of ingredient restrictions people have that hopefully we'll be able to tap into and deliver products of the highest quality that meet all of their dietary requirements.

We want to give people clean ingredients, things that are metabolically advantageous, and hopefully in the coming years you'll see us continue to broaden our offerings.

### **What are some of your challenges in product development?**

**Mr. Bilyeu:** There are so many elements to the manufacturing process that we didn't even know existed. There's so many ways to deliver ingredients to a product, just the way flavorings are made. There are tons of variations. There are a lot of assumptions other food companies make, and we've challenged a lot of those assumptions and work in flavor houses to get (certain ingredients).

We don't use sugars, for instance, which is a really common way of delivering seasonings. So, working with our chips, we had to go in and find a way to strip all that out and start over and build something from scratch that wasn't riding on the back of sugar. When you've got the institutional focus on constant never-ending improvement, you really do find all of these exciting, incremental ways to make the products better over time.



Quest released its line of Protein Chips that doesn't rely on sugars.

### **What has driven your remarkable growth?**

**Mr. Bilyeu:** That comes down to two things. One, we have a product that's real, and it works, so the more people use it, the more they become convinced of its efficacy. We strive for ever-increasing consumer confidence.

And then, two, social media. We recognize that we live in the “connection economy.” Our job is to really connect with our consumers to bring value above all else and to facilitate an open dialogue with them so when we do something wrong, they let us know and we react, and when we do something right, that we know and we can focus on things that are delivering the most value.

I think about somebody’s kid eating our product, and that’s the responsibility that you have, and that has to be at the forefront of your mind every step of the way if you want to build a company in today’s super connected world.