

## Okami Foods – Bringing Asian Specialty “Anytime” Meals Mainstream

Okami founders Mary Demartinis and Laura McKee are unassuming, salt of the earth people – or should that be soy? What started as two talented ladies with a catering background selling homemade foods in an Agoura Hills farmers market quickly became an entrepreneurial dream when they realized they discovered something that excited the American palette – sushi. Not just any sushi, but shelf-stable sushi, fully cooked with a delicate taste that even the most skeptical passerby couldn't resist.



*(left to right) KKA&J Managing Partner Dennis King, Okami founders Mary Demartinis and Laura McKee, and KKA&J Partner Louis Hamel.*

Mary and Laura's love for sushi coupled with their culinary talents led them to develop their signature dish - the California Roll with its vinegar rice and crab meat rolled in a roasted seaweed wrap. Sales were brisk, but it was a labor of love to make the popular rolls fresh daily. After extensive research and development, packaging allowed them to extend the shelf life of their products, which created sales opportunities beyond local farmers markets and opened the door to entering retail markets.

“Based on our customers’ reactions when sampling our product it was obvious that consumer acceptance was promising, but financing for our venture was not,” said Mary when describing the



difficulties the two experienced funding their kitchen operation. Maxing out their personal credit cards may have been the only option available to them as a fresh start-up company, but it certainly could not be a long term strategy to sustain and grow the business.

Key to Okami's business success has been the relationships Mary and Laura have made along the way. A white-knuckle flight from Burbank to Las Vegas proved to be the catalyst for introducing King, King, Alleman & Jensen to the Okami family. KKA&J Partner Louis Hamel began a conversation with fellow passenger Laura McKee

and, in the time span of a short 45 minute gate-to-gate flight, discovered how the firm's partners and accounting professionals could help Okami grow, survive and thrive.

Today Okami employs nearly 350 employees and distributes nationwide. They have four regional sushi kitchens strategically located throughout the United States with an impressive 65 percent of the prepackaged sushi market share. Okami continues to expand its product line, offer private labels, and retails in such industry giants as Costco, Albertson's, Trader Joes, and Sam's Club. As the list grows, so does their need for sound financial planning.

For Mary and Laura, neither can separate the business from the individual. As a privately-held company, there is a direct pass thru generated by the organization's operations. "It makes a difference in the types of provisions a business owner needs to make," said Louis. "Our firm has helped Mary and Laura put together a business succession plan, has guided them through estate planning, and actively participated in strategic planning, tax planning, and the overall direction of the business."



In addition, KKA&J assisted in the recruiting of Okami's chief financial officer and subsequent transition, restructured a pre-existing partnership to a licensee agreement, and managed inventory audits. "We're business people and entrepreneurs who love what we do," offered Laura. "The trust and comfort level we have with KKA&J allows us to be free to run our business."