

Marilyn Raybin and Valerie Lovell

FOUNDERS, MARVELL FOODS

When Marilyn Raybin refers to herself as a chicken gambler, she's not cracking wise about her reluctance to make the big bet. She's simply stating a fact.

In fact, Raybin and her business partner, Valerie Lovell, have made a living—and a good one at that—by going all in. Only, the founders of Marvell Foods do so by gambling primarily on poultry.

The Boca-based food-trading company, which launched in 2007, tracks down and purchases overrun and surplus products, as well as items involved in situations like insurance claims or repackaging issues. Marvell then attempts to re-sell that product to clients ranging from supermarkets and schools to food banks and prisons.

Though Marvell deals with meat, pork, fish, processed items and some non-food products, make no bones about it: Chicken is king.

"We're always on the phone with the major chicken companies, asking if they have anything in the freezer they have to move," Raybin says.

"We look under every rock for product," Lovell adds.

More often than not, they find it. When Birds Eye changed the flavor on one of its Voila! frozen meals, leaving 1 million pounds of chicken strips in limbo, Marvell bought it all. When Perdue changed the shape of its dinosaur-shaped nuggets, Raybin and Lovell purchased the excess inventory. The manufacturer that works with T.G.I. Friday's was sitting on a half-million pounds of steak after Friday's switched its 12-ounce steaks to 10-ounce versions. Marvell paid \$500,000 for the meat.

But that's only half the battle.

"When you buy something, if you don't

have it sold the second you buy it, you're gambling," Raybin says. "And we gamble big. When you're sitting on a million pounds of inventory, you have a lot of sleepless nights. That's why they invented Xanax."

"You order a truck, and you have fresh product sitting on somebody's dock," Lovell says. "And the truck doesn't show up. These things happen. There's a lot of pressure with this job."

It's a profession that neither Raybin nor Lovell, both originally from Long Island, expected to enter when they were stay-at-home moms. Each started on the food brokerage side, where companies make a commission with no exposure financially—in fact, they both worked with Raybin's brother at different points in their careers.

But the big money, and the big risk, is on the trading side. Raybin and Lovell felt that, together, their industry knowledge and persistence could pay dividends. It has—and then some. Marvell is a multimillion-dollar business with 10 full-time employees.

"This isn't jewelry; this is food," Raybin says. "So it is a necessity. But we still have to keep reinventing the wheel and finding new ways to create business."

Sometimes, both ladies will tell you, those gambles come with a price.

"We bought 250,000 pounds of sweet potato fries, and we just couldn't move them," Raybin says.

"Do you want a bag?"

—KEVIN KAMINSKI



Marilyn Raybin (left) and Valerie Lovell

did you know?

Raybin's father founded Ferris Stahl-Meyer, a meat-packing plant in the Bronx. "Big chunks of meat would come in," she says. "Flies were on it. Rats were around. That's why I became a vegetarian."

When 7-Eleven ended a contract with the manufacturer that made its burritos, that company was left with 2 million pounds of inventory. Marvell paid cash for the burritos and made a profit by re-selling them to universities, schools and food banks.

Marvell is creating value-priced retail items (meatballs, pasta, sausage) for discount stores such as Dollar Tree.