

Western Success in a Nutshell

Company's owners travel to the ends of the earth for the finest-quality product

By Roger Pusey – Deseret News business writer

Anybody opening a container of mixed nuts from Western Nut Company, at 434 South 300 West, [in Salt Lake City] probably doesn't have a clue that company owners literally go the ends of the earth to bring them the finest product available.

Nuts come from several of the United States and numerous foreign countries and because of the political unrest in some of these places, Western Nut officials keep their fingers crossed that their source of nuts won't leave their roasters empty.

Even though the nut business is interesting, it might be a mistake to do a story about Western Nut at anytime other than a special occasion, such as Christmas, Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, etc., that's because the business of seven [1990 figures] full time and five [1990 figures] part-time employees runs on an even keel most of the year.

But between now [September] and Christmas, the business begins gearing up for the holiday season and by December there will be 90 [1990 figures] employees, the roasters will be going full blast and the warehouse will be filled to the rafters with all sorts of nuts.

At 27 [sic] [45] years old, Western Nut isn't old by business standards, but its growth over that time makes it one of Utah's established firms with a familiar name.

Western Nut was started 27 [sic] [45] years ago by Wellington McDonald, one of the sons of Mrs. J.G. McDonald, the woman whose chocolates bore her name for many years in Utah. Wellington sold the company seven [28] years ago to Wesco Development Co, whose principals, Michael Place, David Gillette, and Mac Bay are brothers-in-law.

Place, who is president of Western Nut, said McDonald started the business on Pierpont Street and always used the finest products and kept his merchandise fresh. "We are continuing that tradition," Place said.

The nuts at Western Nut don't have much chance of getting stale on the shelves because between Thanksgiving and Christmas the company does 40 percent [1990 figures] of its business and sales are brisk. The times around other special days like Mother's Day, Father's Day, and Valentine's Day are busy but pale in comparison to the Yule season.

During the non-holiday and non-special-day times, Western Nut employees are busy roasting nuts for sale in their own store. They also roast bulk nuts under a private label for [many companies], provide roasted nuts for [many local companies] and customers in several states.

At Western Nut Co. peanut oil is used exclusively in the roasting process because it has qualities similar to all of the various nuts. Chris Nylander [former production manager] said peanut oil is one of the more expensive oils, but it doesn't have cholesterol.

Western Nut could use cottonseed oil that costs 39 cents [1990 prices] per pound but sticks with peanut oil that costs 89 cents [1990 prices] per pound. Nylander said some of his competitors purchase any type of oil. "Just anything that happens to be on sale."

Western Nut handles five different types of peanuts: Spanish No. 1, Spanish splits, Virginia extra-large, redskin blanched and redskin jumbo runner. They come from Virginia, North Carolina, Georgia, Texas and Oklahoma.

There are also five different kinds of cashews imported from India and Africa. "They can't be grown in the U.S. because it is not hot enough," Nylander said.

English walnuts come from California; black walnuts come from Missouri; pecans come from Texas, New Mexico and Arizona; pistachios and almonds from California; filberts from Oregon [and Turkey]; Brazil nuts from Brazil, Peru and Bolivia; and macadamia nuts from Australia, the Philippine Islands, New Zealand and Hawaii.

Nylander said Brazil nuts aren't roasted because they turn mushy, so the ones you get in a Western Nut gift box are raw, although they do have some natural oil inside.

[All other] nuts arrive raw and ready for roasting in peanut oil, he said. They come in burlap bags, tins or boxes, and peanut oil arrives in 55-gallon drums.

The raw nuts are placed in roasters (which resemble large deep fat fryers) and roasted for varying times, depending on which nuts are involved. After that they either go into large boxes that are shipped to customers, or packaged for sale in the company store or thrown into large mixers for making varieties of mixed nuts.

The company is expanding its mail order [and internet] business and one of the ways is to stuff a company brochure inside newspapers [and magazines]. The brochures have colored pictures of various gift items including five-pound sacks of pistachios and nuts in wooden boxes and plastic containers.

Although the company doesn't have a sales force, Place said he spends \$35,000 [1990 figures] annually on radio and television commercials just before special occasions, including Christmas. The company has 15,000 names [1990 figures] on its mailing list to receive gift item brochures.

Since 1983 when Western Nut was purchased by Wesco, the company has expanded five times and now has 20,000 square feet [1990 figures] for its roasting, storage and packaging operations. Last year the company did \$2.2 million [1990 figures] in business and expects an increase this year.