

Wharton: Salt Lake City's nuttiest business

By Tom Wharton - Salt Lake Tribune Travel & Recreation Writer

This is the time of year when a Salt Lake company that has been in business since 1966 goes nuts.

Though open throughout the year, Western Nut hires more employees and becomes busier and busier as corporations and private citizens come to its factory retail store, visit its kiosks at nine local malls or buy gifts at its 36 holiday grocery store displays to prepare for the Christmas holiday gift season.

Giving a nicely wrapped box of mixed nuts, a basket filled with nuts, candy and Utah products or a small package of cashews from Western Nut is a tradition many enjoy each year.

Workers roast cashews, pack gift boxes, make fudge, English toffee and peanut brittle and keep shelves stocked with candy, Utah products such as honey and chocolate and holiday decorations.

"People think we are sort of a Christmas store and we are destinations," said Cindy Whitehead, retail services manager for Western Nut. "But we are here year-round."

COO Loren Mercer said Wellington McDonald began Western Nut in 1966 and sold it to current owners Michael Place and David Gillette in 1983.

"We don't grow any of the nuts," he said. "We buy every type of nut raw, except for macadamias and pistachios. We are known for our roast, especially our cashews, which are a light golden brown. We only keep a shelf life of 12 weeks, and then we pull them."

Mercer is obviously a nut about nuts. He can tell and show you how they are roasted, where they are from and which aren't technically a nut.

Peanuts, for example, are not a true nut, because they grow in the ground like a bean and are not harvested off a tree.

Cashews come from India, Africa and Vietnam. Peanuts are grown in the southeastern United States. Western Nut gets its walnuts, pistachios and almonds from California, its macadamias from Australia, its pecans from New Mexico and Texas and black walnuts that grown wild from Missouri.

In addition to being sold in the retail area, some of the nuts might go into a salad package for a grocery store chain, be sent to a local restaurant to be part of a meal or used by candy or ice-cream makers.

The factory behind the retail store at 434 S 300 West is a busy place most times of the year but especially during Christmas. There is popcorn to be popped, peanut brittle, fudge and English toffee to be made, nuts to be roasted and dozens of gifts to be assembled, wrapped and shipped. The company's work force will grow to almost 200 this month.

What many don't realize, though, is the retail portion of the shop not only includes nuts, trail mixes, and other products put together at Western Nut, but also is a shop with gifts, many available for the next holiday.

Whitehead, who is in charge of finding the collectables, spends almost an entire year planning for Christmas. She attends a collectables market in January to buy for that year's holiday season.

"It's a crapshoot," she said. "You have to guess what people are going to want. The people at the markets set the trends."

That said, customers force Whitehead and her staff to be creative. Some companies bring in their own pens or containers. One young man asked her if she could put an engagement ring inside a bag of nuts.

Prices can range from a few dollars for a small bag of nuts wrapped in cellophane and tied with a ribbon to huge baskets filled with all sorts of goodies, many of which come from Utah companies.

For many holiday shoppers, no Christmas season is complete without a trip to Western Nut, a Utah company that keeps innovating the way it packages its many products, all the while keeping up traditions. The biggest problem is not going nuts when purchasing gifts or stocking stuffers.

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