

Roasting Business Goes Nuts During Christmas Season

By Joe Rolando – Tribune Staff Writer

Western Nut Co.'s business picks up so much during the Christmas season President Jerry M. "Michael" Place often feels like he is running two companies.

He observed the company makes 40 to 50 percent of its annual net profit from retail sales during the Christmas season, which this year began at the end of November. He said during the rest of the year, most of the company's resources are spent drumming up business from wholesale customers.

The change in Western's work force more dramatically demonstrates the difference between the company's two levels of business. Before and after the Christmas season, the company employs nine [1984 figures]. During the Christmas season, the work force ---almost overnight--- increases to about 45 [1984 figures].

Few Problems

Western's manager, Kris Nylander [former production manager], who brought a grocery business background to the job, said the rather sudden increase in employees causes few, if any, management problems. "Most of the [temporary] workers come back year after year," he explained. "So they're already trained... We have some people who have come back and worked with us every year for the past 14 or 15 years."

It was evident last week by visiting the company's plant and retail showroom, at 434 South 300 West, the operation is in its busiest season. Even Mr. Nylander, wearing a grocery store clerk's apron, carried orders from the production area to customers in the showroom, stopping only long enough to offer some almonds to a customer's children.

Business was so brisk that lines formed at each of the four check-out stands. The production department was just as busy keeping up with orders. None of the employees stopped long enough to talk about anything but business.

"When we bought the company, they [the former owners] were servicing customers out of an area that was approximately one-quarter the size of the showroom we now have out there," observed Mr. Place. We felt that was something that needed immediate attention because in November and December [sales] we couldn't adequately service the customers."

Mr. Place said before the remodeling, clerks could only wait on one person at a time, and because the products displayed were behind a counter, customers found it difficult, if not impossible, to view them.

The result was a remodeling project that centralized and enlarged the production department and increased the size of the retail showroom.

“We felt there was an advantage for the customers who could walk through and browse,” observed Mr. Place. “And we hoped there would be some impulse buying of items they otherwise hadn’t bought. And that has been the case.”

Quality of Product

But Mr. Place maintains the hallmarks of the company’s success are the quality of its product and the way it processes nuts. He said Western, unlike other firms, uses no preservatives and does not gas-flush their nuts. And that, he claimed, ensures the product’s freshness.

Gas-flushing replaces the oxygen in packaging with a preservative gas.

Mr. Place said rotating stock quickly and employing people trained in “the art of nut roasting” are the company’s top priorities. Nut roasting, he added, is “not something you learn overnight; and it is not like cooking on your stove at home where you set a timer and when the time is done you pull the product out and it’s ready to go.

Mr. Place said a good nut roaster can tell whether a nut has been roasted enough merely by breaking one in half. “The process is pretty meticulous. If you overcook or undercook nuts, you can render them unpalatable.”

Western’s John Baird [former master roaster] had just three minutes to talk about nut roasting last week before he had to pull a batch of almonds from his roaster. He said he joined the company 13 years ago and learned the art from one of Western’s founders, Wellington McDonald.

“There’s only one way you can learn it, and that is by doing it,” he said, noting the best way to tell whether most types of nuts are roasted enough is by their color. He said almonds are different in that one must be cut open and examined.

Mr. Place said because a nut begins to deteriorate quickly after it is roasted, Western attempts to get them on the shelf and sold quickly after processing.

In the Shell

The president said one of Western’s claims to fame is being one of the few nut companies in the West to roast peanuts in the shell. He added peanuts roasted this way have a different taste.

“The other thing we do is roast all our nuts in peanut oil whereas some of our competitors roast in other oil, such as coconut oil,” said Mr. Place. “We just believe we should roast in the same type of oil which is indicative of the product we are roasting... So there is a difference in the nut you get here.”

Mr. Nylander quoted the previous owners of Western Nut as saying during the early 1970’s it was difficult, and sometimes impossible to buy peanut oil. He said Western had to use coconut oil for three or four months.

The company received many complaints. As soon as peanut oil was available, Western began using it again.

Further Proof

That Western continues to use peanut oil today is further proof of the confidence Mr. Place and his brothers-in-law partners have in the company's founders and previous owners, Mr. McDonald and Helen Bean. Mr. Place stressed, "Our corporate strategy has been to build on the sound foundation that Wellington and Helen Bean built. We're just absolutely amazed at the good will they've built in the community. We've even made a concerted effort to keep all of their old-line employees."

Mr. McDonald and Ms. Bean formed Western in April of 1966. At first, it was called Western States Nut Co.

Mr. McDonald was no stranger to the foods business. His family was the principal of the J.G. McDonald Candy Co., long-time Salt Lake City manufacturer of chocolates. Mr. Place and his partners in Western, David L. Gillette, a Salt Lake City attorney, and Mac Bay, an LDS mission president in Arizona, also are no strangers to business. They and two other men recently sold their stock in the 17-theater Trolley Theatres to Plitt Theater for an undisclosed sum.

Mr. Place observed, "The reason Western was interesting to us as an acquisition was because of the meticulous attention that Wellington McDonald and Helen Bean paid to the quality of the products they purchased."

Mr. McDonald continues with the company in an advisory capacity [since deceased].