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Cereal growth

Local company Wildtime Foods continues to stress local ties and quality as it grows to meet demand

MULTIMEDIA

PHOTOS



Made in Lane County: Wildtime Foods is a wholesale food manufacturer of hand made granolas, trail mixes & raw grain cereals. They have been in business since 1981 and sell products in bulk Markets of Choice, Kiva, Capella, Red Barn and other natural food stores across the country. Taken Thursday Oct.24, 2013. Here, co-owner Whit Hemphill talks about the business. (Kevin Clark/The Register-Guard)



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The Register-Guard

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GLENWOOD — THE SWEET SMELL OF MAPLE SYRUP, OATS AND SPICY CARDAMON BAKING TOGETHER WARMED THE AIR ON A CHILLY, WET FALL DAY AS WHIT HEMPHILL THREADED HIS WAY THROUGH THE LINE OF NARROW ROOMS THAT MAKE UP WILDTIME FOODS' FACTORY.

It was the smell of a new granola recipe, Karakoram Krunch, developed by assistant production manager and head research and development person Nicolette Molitor, a graduate of Lane Community College's culinary program.

"It's really good," said Hemphill, co-owner of the company.

Wildtime, which markets its products under the Grizzlies brand, got some time in the foodie spotlight recently when its granola was chosen as a key ingredient in a beer honoring the Grateful Dead. But Wildtime was on a growth trajectory long before Delaware-based Dogfish Head Brewery came calling.

Hemphill's partner, Brad Averill, estimates that sales will increase by about 17 percent this year. Longer term, he said, "our goal is 10 to 15 percent (growth) per year."

The rambling factory in Glenwood, where products are still made by hand, has been going full blast to keep up with demand, Hemphill said. But the bottom line was the company needed space to grow, he said.

Which is why he and Averill are leasing a building in the Whiteaker neighborhood with an option to buy, Hemphill said. They expect to move in by next spring. In addition to bringing the corporate offices — now in downtown Eugene — and production — now in Glenwood — together in the same ZIP code, the move will almost double Wildtime's space.

"Right now, between the sales and administrative offices and production, we have about 5,500 square feet," Averill said. "The footprint (of the new building) is 6,000 square feet. However, we'll be building a second floor, with about 3,000 square feet. And, in the (ground floor) area not covered by the second floor, we can stack pallets much higher."

Averill and Hemphill also plan to double the number of ovens to eight and to add more staff.

But they are carefully controlling their growth, the partners said. Quality control is important to them, and they don't plan to give that up in exchange for faster growth, they said. "We have kept a lot of the ways that (founder) Doug (Clark) established," Averill said.

Among the non-negotiables: Wildtime's products will continue to be made by hand.

"It makes a difference," Averill said. "The process of being so close to things, the quality control, that's where you see the difference. People look over it so carefully to make sure there is no foreign matter. There are uniform pieces. Machines can't do that.

"It was a big step for us to introduce the Hobard mixers about five years ago. But we had developed a product (Aunt Maple's Crunchy Granola) we couldn't stir by hand. It would kill the employees if we did that."

"We are looking at ways we can introduce efficiencies without sacrificing quality," Averill said. "What goes in the box has to be as good as what we're putting in the box now."

But, for example, they're considering investing in machinery to fill and seal bags, he said. "I don't think that will sacrifice any quality."

When Averill, who previously worked for Hewlett-Packard in tech support and sales, and his then-wife bought the company from Clark in 2002, it had about 15 employees, mostly part-time, and annual sales of about \$1.5 million. As Averill began to grow the company, he stayed true to Clark's commitment to handmade products using whole foods but converted the part-time employees to full time. "You need to build a business on full-time employees who are fully invested in the company," he said.

Hemphill joined the company in 2004 and is now a partner. "I bought out my wife's half of the business and sold it to Whit," Averill said. "I wanted him to have an equity stake in the business. It's a motivator."

The company continued to grow until the recession hit, Averill said. "In 2007, things kind of plateaued out," he said. "During the recession, 2008 and so on, we kind of just held our own, with a sales drop of less than 5 percent."

Now, the company is growing again, and Averill is working on what he calls his five- to seven-year plan.

"Our plan is: Whit will buy out the remaining part of the business," Averill, 62, said. "I can ride off into the sunset."

Already, Averill said, “My role is changing. I told Whit, ‘My role is to build the company you want five years from now.’ ”

Hemphill, 35, already has a pretty clear idea of the kind of company he wants.

It’s important to him that, whenever possible, the company buys its ingredients locally, including oats from Grain Millers and honey from Glory Bee, which is a friendly competitor as well as a supplier.

The Wildtime owners want to know where each ingredient comes from, and who grows it, Hemphill said.

Almonds, for example, come from California almond farmers “we’ve worked with for years and years and years and years,” he said

Wildtime offers both organic products and products that are not certified organic but are priced lower, Hemphill said. “We wanted to offer a wholesome choice for people” who might not be able to afford certified organic, he said.

The company website promises that, certified organic or not, “You won’t find genetically modified ingredients, preservatives, processed sugars or grains, added salt, trans fats, animal products, artificial color, or hydrogenated oils in the foods we make.”

Wildtime Foods has benefited in recent years from some changing consumer trends, Hemphill said, with people becoming more interested in healthy eating.

“There are the numbers out there, about the health of the general population,” he said. Then, he said, “There’s people’s subjective observance, in day to day life, (of) people around them who are not healthy. And they (realize) you can’t just eat fast food.”

And, he said, there’s also the flavor factor. “I think there’s a taste difference, when people try something that’s minimally processed.”

All of which has led to more interested in natural foods, whole foods, foods that have been minimally processed, and organics, even if organics carry a higher price tag, he said.

“People have been willing to pay more for quality when it comes to watches, when it comes to clothes, when it comes to cars. Now they’re thinking, ‘I should be willing to do that with things I put in my body.’ Plus, it tastes better.”

Hemphill wants to continue developing new products, like the Karakoram Krunch granola.

The relationships Averill and Hemphill have developed with growers and producers has enabled them to build a profitable sideline distributing products such as almonds, which also allows them to buy their ingredients in larger quantities and get a price break.

“ This (distribution) is about 40 to 45 percent of our business,” Hemphill said. “It brings in extra dollars.”

When he first came to Wildtime Foods, he said, “I didn’t think I was going to stay forever.”

He’s now taking a longer term view when he talks about the company.

While Wildtime is growing at a healthy clip, “Our intent is not to blow it up like a firecracker then sell it off,” he said. “We want to keep it in the community. We want to keep manufacturing a good product, to keep hiring local people.”

WILDTIME FOODS

Producer and wholesaler of granola, cereals, trail mix

Owners: Brad Averill and Whit Hemphill

Location: Corporate offices at 132 Broadway, Eugene; production at 1510 Concord St., Glenwood

Employees: 22

Annual revenue: Projected at \$3.5 million in 2013

Online: grizzliesbrand.com

“ *“People have been willing to pay more for quality when it comes to watches, when it comes to clothes, when it comes to cars. Now they’re thinking, ‘I should be willing to do that with things I put in my body.’ Plus, it tastes better.”*

— *Whit Hemphill, Co-Owner of Wildtime foods*

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