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Going nuts

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WINDSOR—Walk into the lobby at Powell & Stokes in Bertie County and take a step into a rural slice of Eastern North Carolina life, steeped in tradition.

An old, dark safe that was bought used around the 1930s is still in operation in the office. Aged photographs of the pioneers of the farm and fertilizer company hang on the wood panel walls. And wooden chairs are all about, waiting for the seasoned farmers and fellow friends to come in and sit and talk crops, weather and just about anything else with each other.

For many years at the Powell & Stokes fertilizer company, there have been samples of fresh peanuts available to tickle the taste buds of people picking up a handful as they were passing through. And that is where it all began for Bertie County Peanuts, the daughter-company of Powell & Stokes, which saw a 40 percent increase in sales just last year and has shown an increase in sales every year since its inception in 1994.

In 1919, brothers-in-law Luther Powell and Jonathan Stokes went into the fertilizer and farm supply business when they built Powell & Stokes. Business was serving the local farmers by blending fertilizer, spreading fertilizer, making what farmers need based upon soil tests, providing crop protection chemicals, selling crop seeds and giving advice.

In the 1930s, “Mr. Luther” and “Uncle John” began buying peanuts from local farmers and delivering them to regional markets, and business prospered with the fertilizer business. In the 1940s, Powell’s sons, Jack Sr. and Lu Whit, returned from serving in World War II and became the main partners. Jack Jr. said that this allowed the first generation owners to “sit on the warehouse porch and catch up on the news of the day.”

Jack Sr.’s sons, Jack Jr. and Bill Powell, came into the business in the 1970s as the third generation in the family business. And Jack Jr.’s son, Jeff, came into the business about seven years ago, representing generation four.

“We’re going to try to make it for 100 years,” said Jack Jr. “I don’t know if we’ll make it or not, but we’ll see.”

About 30 years ago, as the second generation of Powells evolved with the fertilizer business, Jack Sr. developed a special recipe for “Blister Fried Peanuts,” which he cooked in the now infamous popcorn popper. It was those batches of fresh cooked nuts that were set out in old lard can lids for people to sample as they came into the business. And the clientele literally went nuts for the tasty nuts.

“People kept coming in and saying, ‘You should sell these!’” said Jack Jr. According to Powell, one thing lead to another, and they began putting their name on them in 1994.

The name Bertie County Peanuts is steeped in pride. Powell said that some time ago, he served on a Windsor town committee called the Committee of 20, which was appointed by the county commissioners. The committee’s purpose was to explore various topics centered on the quality of life in Bertie County. So when it came time to name the peanuts, the Powells felt that it would be a good idea to advertise the county a bit and give the people of Bertie something to be proud of.

“I’m glad we did that,” said Powell. “In Bertie County, people didn’t have much to brag about... People can give the nuts away as Christmas presents and say, ‘This is where I live, and this is what we do here.’”

Today there are numerous varieties of Bertie County peanuts, all of which are the results of meticulous dedication to getting the homemade recipes just right.

The variety includes, but is not limited to, the original blister fried peanut, which is a cocktail peanut, roasted peanuts, spicy peanuts, chocolate-covered peanuts, butterscotch flavored peanuts, fried pecans and peanut brittle, all of which are homemade.

“We’re having a lot of fun with it,” said Powell. “We really are.”

And since the busy season for the Powell & Stokes fertilizer business is from about March to August, the business of Bertie County Peanuts gives the employees during the slow months, especially November and December when sales are at their highest.

With each passing year, sales continue to grow. Powell said that it is because people are more aware of what they’re eating. “We like to say that if you eat a handful of peanuts every day, you’ll live forever,” he said with a smile. “And peanuts are a cheap gift. Everybody likes ‘em.”

He says that placing the business on the Internet has doubled sales. And people from as far away as Alaska and Hawaii have called or clicked to purchase the mouth-pleasing peanuts.

He believes that Bertie County Peanuts are so popular because of the unique packaging, the quality of the peanuts and the outstanding customer service. The nuts are sold in clear, plastic containers that are reusable instead of cans. And every bit of the bulk of the peanuts is cooked four pounds at a time. “This allows our guys to look at every peanut,” he said. The Powells also only use the super extra large peanuts, which are only about 2 percent of every crop.

“I’ll stick to my guns on the quality of the product and the packaging,” said Powell. “We’ve never had a jar broken, and we’ve had very few complaints.”

He added that most peanut providers don't make their own chocolate, and they tend to use small peanuts with a lot of chocolate. "We don't over-do it with the chocolate, and we use jumbo peanuts," he said. And no one does butterscotch except Bertie County Peanuts.

Powell said that the peanuts do have a shelf life and that they go "off flavor" in about six to eight weeks. "So we try not to wholesale too many," he said. "And when we do, we try to have it close-by so we can get them off of the shelves when we need to." Outlets are in Edenton, Greenville, Elizabeth City and Hertford.

"We (also) try to bend over backwards on customer service," said Powell. If an order is placed by 1 p.m., it goes out the same day, he said. "That's one benefit of being small," he added. And if a customer is unsatisfied, he gets his money back—the cost of the product plus shipping.

The Powells are looking to expand the Bertie County Peanuts product line. A recipe has already been perfected for "Red Hot Hexlena," which is named for a rural crossroads in Bertie County. Each label for this flavor will include the legend of the Hexlena name.

Powell said he would also like to develop a natural peanut butter as well as various trail mixes.

Until then, the Powells will continue to keep samples out in the lobby to "feed the monkeys," as Jack Jr. put it with a smile.

Bobby Eubanks, a "regular" at Powell & Stokes, said that he likes to come in and get a Pepsi and sit down with the whole jar.

He said, "And Jack Powell stays on me all the time, 'Put 'em back! You've had enough!'"

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