

CB's Nuts: From small-town hobby to big-time business

As Kitsap County's peanut king and the namesake of CB's Nuts, Clark Bowen's life revolves around nuts. And what started out as a hobby for him is now a stable business venture that can boast of sales of more than 100 tons of in-shell peanuts and 173 tons of peanut butter annually.

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For Clark Bowen

By **LESLIE KELLY**

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KINGSTON — For Clark Bowen, the perfect day involves his 8-year-old son Jesse, some peanuts and baseball. It doesn't really matter if they're at the stadium, or at home watching the game on TV.

“Just cracking peanuts and talking baseball,” Bowen said. “That's my perfect day.”

And rightfully so. As Kitsap County's peanut king and the namesake of CB's Nuts, Bowen's life revolves around nuts. And what started out as a hobby for him is now a stable business venture that can boast of sales of more than 100 tons of in-shell peanuts and 173 tons of peanut butter annually.

“Our success can be attributed to having a good business plan and having a good team in place from the very beginning,” Bowen said. “All along the way we've plotted out the numbers we wanted to reach and we've had faith in those numbers. Sometimes our projections were like just throwing darts. But we hit our targets and we're right where we thought we'd be.”

Much of the credit, Bowen said, has to go to his wife and business partner, Tami, and to an investor, Tom Hults.

“I was curious (about growing the business,)” he said. “Tami was more focused. And Tom, he knew the business technology side of things. He looked at our systems early-on and plotted out how we could reach our goals.”

Bowen started out very small. After buying a bag of fresh roasted peanuts at a Mariners-Orioles baseball game in Baltimore, he realized that those kind of peanuts weren't available around baseball in the Pacific Northwest. He soon found himself pushing a small hobby-sized roaster to Safeco Field and selling peanuts, warm, out of the roaster. That was in 2002.

"I was just hoping to break even," he said. "But sometimes I'd sell out and then customers would get mad. I had a guy yelling at me and I told him 'Sorry man, this is just a hobby.'"

About a year later, he met Tami and she saw the potential for growth. That led Bowen to look for antique roasting equipment that could be used to roast more nuts. For awhile, the couple worked out of their home.

And then in 2007, they moved to an old fire station on Highway 104 outside of Kingston. They started experimenting with other kinds of nuts and pumpkin seeds, all the while staying true to their slow roasting technique using no salt or oils.

"With many large industrial processes, they use hot ovens and push the product through on a conveyor-type system," he said. "We always barrel roast our nuts."

The "slower and lower" heat process takes more time, but develops more flavor.

"The longer they roast, the more oil is activated resulting in more depth of flavor," Bowen said. "That's why our products are the best."

Reaching out to Central Market in Poulsbo, Bowen approached the produce manager, hoping the store would stock his products.

"I just wanted to test the waters," he said. "They said 'Yes' and they became our flagship store."

Based on their interest, Bowen contacted other stores and soon CB's Nuts were in Whole Foods, Haggen and PCC markets. To date, CB's Nuts are in 800 stores. And just last week, the company got the approval to put their peanut butter in Whole Foods nationwide.

Yes, that's right. Peanut butter. That product was added to their line in 2010, after the company received a large shipment of shelled peanuts by mistake.

Bowen had a small grinder to make peanut butter in the company's showroom at the old fire station, but he invested in a larger grinder and began the peanut butter line. Like with all of his products, the peanut butter is natural with only one ingredient — peanuts.

With adding peanut butter to all Whole Foods, CB's Nuts received an \$80,000 low-interest loan from Whole Foods, the second of two loans that they've gotten from that company.

Since 2010, CB's Nuts has opened a second location — a facility just down the highway where most of the roasting and peanut butter production takes place. Recently, they expanded to 11,000-square-feet, about twice the size of their original production space. The company now has about 30 employees.

And with a five-year business plan in place, Bowen hopes his products will be in 3,000 stores by 2020.

“We want to get bigger,” he said. “But not so big that we outgrow North Kitsap. We want to keep our production here. And we're committed to roasting the way we do now, no matter how big we get.”

The fire station location, at 6013 NE Highway 104, remains open as a tasting room where visitors can watch a rotating 1920s roaster, originally used by the Adam's Peanut Butter company in Tacoma. There's a lunch counter where customers can get a beer or locally made soft drink and a hot dog. There's some chocolate and peanut butter cups made with CB's peanut butter and Theo's chocolate, a company located in the Fremont area of Seattle. Of course they can choose from an array of roasted nuts, too.

“The only rule is that we don't throw the shells on the floor,” Bowen said. “We have baskets for them.”

In one corner is a television, where if the Mariners are playing, baseball will be on. And Bowen has a section of the Mariner's home dug out from the Kingdome, which he bought and refurbished.

Growth is on Bowen's mind constantly. But his plans also include something else.

He hopes that someday the company will perform so well that he can “get small” again and just stand outside of Safeco Field selling roasted peanuts.

“That’s my retirement plan,” he said. “When that happens, then I’ll know I’ve come full circle.”



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