

MAKING THE BRAND

So people tell you that your 'specialty' is so good you should sell it? Listen to these local folks who have taken the plunge.

Stories by Mike Dunne Bee Food Editor

On paper, the figures are impressive: During 2003, the most recent year for which statistics are available, the sale of specialty foods in the United States hit nearly \$23 billion, reports the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade Inc.

That's a 20 percent increase from 2001.

And in 2003 alone, 839 new seasonings and sauces were introduced, as were 558 baked goods, 427 confections, 336 beverages, 244 spreads, 212 snacks and so on.

The Sacramento area is home to dozens of specialty-food producers, from diversified and longtime companies such as Moon Shine Trading Co. of Woodland to such specialized newcomers as Winterhill Farms of Placerville, now releasing its first

olive oils.

Today, we take a look at local specialty-food producers who represent three degrees of involvement in the trade:

● Ishai Zeldner and Amina Harris, who for 26 years have been releasing a series of varietal honeys and fruit spreads under the label of their Moon Shine Trading Co. in Woodland.

● Alan Jong, a Sacramento attorney hoping to break into the industry with chili-roasted pepitas under the brand Striped Carrots.

● Alex Del Guerra, in his fourth year of attempting to establish his Terra di Toscana as a household name for pasta sauces and antipasti.

Their experiences could help others decide whether they really want to try for a piece of that \$23 billion specialty-food pie.

ISHAI ZELDNER and AMINA HARRIS Moon Shine Trading Co.

After 26 years in the specialty-food trade, Ishai Zeldner and Amina Harris have come to terms with the unpredictability of the business.

Which explains why they so easily accept and even laugh at their latest challenges and setbacks, whether it be an infestation of mites endangering honeybees, the loss of a key account, a shortage of jars or soaring nut prices.

And that was just last week.

Nonetheless, sales were up 20 percent each of the past two years as their firm, Moon Shine Trading Co. in Woodland, continues to emerge from the country's post-9/11 recession.

They've acquired two other companies, Island of the Moon (honey) and Cowboy Caviar (pasta sauces). They're close to securing shelf space with two major chains, Whole Foods Market and Cost Plus. And they continue to diversify their already extensive lineup under their original brand, Moon Shine.

What accounts for their longevity?

"Luck," says Zeldner.

"We're stubborn," says Harris.

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Sacramento Bee photography / Owen Brewer

Ishai Zeldner and his wife, Amina Harris, market specialty honey products from their 4,000-square-foot warehouse in Woodland. The couple started their business 26 years ago, hand-coloring their first labels.

Honey: Couple have relied on word of mouth

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They don't say it, but virtually from the outset they have been flexible, carefully and smartly adapting to changes in consumer tastes, never allowing themselves to get stuck sentimentally on one kind of product.

While honey was their first item and continues to provide the foundation for the company's success, they've been diligently inventive in extending their product line.

The two began to distribute honey in Davis in 1979. Their niche was "varietal" honey, and their first product, yellow star thistle honey, still tops their collection. "It's an obnoxious weed, but it produces a delicious product," Zeldner says.

It's been joined not only by numerous other honeys - Northwestern fireweed, black button sage, orange blossom, sweet clover and tupelo, among others - but by a whole bunch of other Moon Shine products: honey straws, honey bears, comb honey, fruit spreads, nut butters and nut spreads. All are certified kosher.

"We're still under \$1 million," Zeldner says of the company's annual revenues.

"But in a couple of years we finally will get there," Harris adds.



He's tall, she's short; both are expressive. They've been married 22 years, and they put in hands-on time at the business almost daily. They only occasionally take a vacation. They have two employees. Neither of their two children is yet involved in the business.

In 1980, they moved the firm to Winters, which exposed them to the area's apricot orchards and led to a product that dramatically raised Moon Shine's revenues and profile when the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade Inc. in 1992 honored their honey-apricot spread.

They are still making it and still using local apricots, though the fruit is getting more difficult to find as orchards dwindle. "We aren't using any of those cheap Turkish apricots," Zeld-

ner vows.

In 1998, Zeldner and Harris moved Moon Shine to a 4,000-square-foot warehouse in Woodland, where the honeys are packed and prepared for shipment.

Over the past 26 years, they've witnessed several changes in the specialty-food business. Producers they came to know have died, retired, sold out or simply shut down. They've seen a dip in the number of major honey packers, down from about 10 a decade ago to two today.

"We're still here," Harris says, happy but not smug.

"But this might finally be our year," Zeldner jokes.

People still are being drawn into the specialty-food trade, however, and a higher proportion of them seem to have

stronger financing than was the custom nearly three decades ago, they say.

What advice do they have for newcomers?

"Be prepared to do everything," Harris says. "Some come into the business very well-financed, but when you come in with nothing, you've got to be prepared to figure it out, to learn it, and to do it all."

"Everyone thinks people in the specialty-food business are making a lot of money, but it's a huge amount of work," adds Harris, who hand-colored the couple's first labels. "Advertising takes money, and we can't afford it. Even today we rely on word of mouth."

If they were starting over, they'd get in touch right off the bat with the National Association for the Specialty Food Trade Inc., Zeldner says. "For the first couple of years, I didn't know it existed."

And if they were starting over today, what kind of product would they introduce?

"Something snacky. You just can't fight it, there's such a big market for snacks today," Zeldner says.

"If you want to make money, you've got to come up with a real good snack food," Harris agrees.

Watch for it: A line of seasoned nuts by Moon Shine.

- Mike Dunne