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Metro Detroiters go nuts for nostalgia as hometown favorite returns

Jennifer Youssef / The Detroit News

BERKLEY -- Fresh. Pure. Delicious.

Perhaps nothing says peanut butter to generations of Metro Detroiters more than those three words -- the familiar pledge of Velvet Peanut Butter. The jar with the yellow label and a freckled-faced boy grimacing under each word was a household staple for decades.

Velvet Peanut Butter disappeared from store shelves more than 20 years ago, but the beloved brand is making a comeback thanks to the aspirations of a Michigan native now living in Georgia.

Eric Bruce, a marketing research director for a television station, has resurrected Velvet Peanut Butter because he was tired of seeing Detroit brands disappear or their production moved elsewhere. He began making the peanut butter at a plant in Fitzgerald, Ga., late last year and shipping cases to Hiller's Markets here.

Nostalgia and Hiller's promotion of Michigan products helped the grocer sell 1,200 jars of Velvet in the first five weeks. The peanut butter is now also available at Oak Ridge and Westborn markets, and plans call for other stores to carry the brand as well.

"Sales really took off," Bruce said. "It has far exceeded my expectations. I know it's just peanut butter, but you're really selling people their hometown and memories."

Created in Michigan

Velvet Peanut Butter traces its roots to a two-car garage in Detroit in 1937. The peanut butter made by Paul Zuckerman became so popular that he expanded his operations three times in Detroit before establishing a plant in Livonia in 1963, where it was made until the family got out of the business in 1985. The peanut butter also was sold in Indiana and Ohio.

Now, Bruce and his wife, Kim, also a Michigan native, are making Velvet using the same recipe. They bought a warehouse in Michigan and hope to make the peanut butter here

eventually.

"It shows our commitment to Michigan," said Bruce, 42. "I'm hoping to bring this company back."

It's a challenging time to sell peanut butter because of the recent salmonella scare and with schools removing peanut products from menus because of allergies, said Fred Marx, a partner with public relations and marketing firm Marx Layne and Co. in Farmington Hills.

Still, Marx believes Velvet will receive a warm welcome in Metro Detroit, where many beloved brands have been purchased by conglomerates and their products made elsewhere. "People are nostalgic for this peanut butter," he said. "While there is competition, in this marketplace, I think people remember it fondly."

Addressing concerns about salmonella, Bruce said every product batch is tested before shipping.

Norbie Zuckerman, the founder's son and whose face graces the label, said he and his mother, Helen, are delighted to see the brand return. "It's a great product," he said. "We think it's great for Detroit."

Fond memories a draw

When Ben Brandenburg, general manager of Oak Ridge Market, heard Velvet Peanut Butter was returning, he wasted no time ordering a shipment for stores in Warren, Royal Oak and Fraser.

"It reminds me of my grandma," said Brandenburg, fondly recalling her Velvet peanut butter and jelly sandwiches.

The grocer expects its first shipment this week and will begin advertising the brand in next week's circular. Once the word is out, Brandenburg expects customers to flock to the peanut butter aisle.

At Westborn Market, marketing director Bryan Bandyk is already anticipating ordering more before the first shipment even arrives.

The grocer, which has stores in Berkley, Dearborn and Livonia, takes pride in supporting Michigan companies, he said. Lately, there's been more demand from customers to offer local products.

"There's a heritage to the product," he said. "If we can provide (the company) with bricks and mortar stores to support their long-term vision of bringing their operation back to Michigan, we want to be part of that vision."

Lori Ludington stumbled upon Velvet Peanut Butter while shopping at Hiller's in Berkley Wednesday afternoon.

"When I turned the corner (in the store aisle) and saw that logo, I thought 'I should get that,' " said Ludington of Huntington Woods who bought a jar as a gift for her colleague's baby

shower. She recalled eating Velvet as a youngster.

"I think it's so awesome," she said. "In this challenging economic environment, it's kind of fun to see this come back."

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