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Crave

Unique brittle is welcome hit for cookie business

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O Hawai'i Island Lava Bakers Brittle has grown popular through sales at warehouse stores.

The appearance of success often masks hardship and struggle, or, as Michael Ching of Hawaii Gourmet Cookies has described it, "hurdling fissures."

Those who have tasted his O Hawai'i Island Lava Bakers Brittle have experienced the sweet — or sweet-tart — buttery, crisp and addicting result of that struggle.

"Success is relative," Ching said.

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Fissures endured by Ching's Hawaii Gourmet Cookies company include the economic crash that followed the 9/11 attacks, the closure of Aloha Airlines, which might have been a huge client, and the more recent economic downturn of 2008.

In those times he had six-figure loans outstanding.

Ching changed direction each time, and his focus on getting his products into wholesale membership stores brings us to the present.

Chocolate-dipped shortbread was firmly established in the local cookie market by 2005, when Costco sought a manufacturer to produce a similar product just for the Hawaii warehouse stores. Ching was among those approached — at the time he was producing cookies, biscotti and other products under the Clara Confectioners line.

"No manufacturer was willing to put their high-margin product in a lower-margin venue," fearing that discounting their cookie line could hurt sales of their more upscale products, Ching said.

Instead he created a new line, branded O Hawai'i, beginning with two macadamia nut shortbreads, one dipped in chocolate and another in chocolate and caramel. More O Hawai'i flavors were added over time.

Then in 2014 a Costco customer ordered a large amount of pecans but did not take the delivery. Costco offered the nuts to Ching and other local manufacturers, then selected O Hawai'i to receive them, Ching said.

He bought the surplus and started experimenting, trying to use the nuts in a version of a national product called Brownie Brittle that was gaining popularity.

He said he started with "the standard reverse-engineering process."

Through experimentation and consideration of the various properties of the ingredients — such as the leavening action of the baking soda — he "dissected what are features and characteristics I wish to retain, what are the flexibilities I want to accomplish," and got a basic brittle — what he equates to a plain white cake.

This basic batter gave him "the ability to add all kinds of flavors," he said.

Ching coined the phrase “bakers brittle” to describe his product, and it was a hit. It now sells in Costco and Sam’s Club stores and the NEX Mall.

Once the pecans were used up, he switched to macadamia nuts.

CHING’S upscale line of Clara Confectioners baked goods and teas, named for his mother, shut down in about 2010. In its heyday it was carried nationally by Neiman Marcus and Saks Fifth Avenue, and was sold in the brand’s own boutique at the Royal Hawaiian hotel. Ching also had hotel clients who placed his cookies on guest pillows as part of their turn-down service.

“Even with that national placement, there was not enough volume because the business is so seasonal,” he said. Sales were great from October through December, “but unless you’re able to carve out some savings to help pay bills the other nine months ... it’s not sustainable.”

Likewise, the hotel business was “quite good,” he said, but it was all based on visitor numbers. Unlike many other local manufacturers, Ching has no merchandising service to deliver his cookies and restock displays, so his small operation couldn’t provide the kind of service the hotels needed. Those facts, coupled with the economic downturn starting in 2008 and plummeting tourism numbers, led him to end the brand.

Ching has created three flavors of his bakers brittle: passion fruit, coconut and brownie-macadamia nut. A new coffee flavor should hit the market in six months.

He believes the brittle — which requires a custom-designed production process — to be a new category in confections.

At first his bakers spread the batter by hand, but eventually he purchased a machine, called a depositor, that extrudes the batter onto baking sheets in thin layers.

“We worked with the manufacturer and modified the nozzle” so the batter would come out flat, he said.

Nuts are hand-chopped. Many other steps in the process — including weighing, packing and sealing the packages — also are done by hand. Rack ovens in Ching’s Kapolei facility bake the thin layers of brittle batter until crisp, then the racks are wheeled out to cool.

Twelve-ounce bags sell for about \$6 at warehouse stores, while 4-ounce bags can be found at other retail shops.

Costco started carrying the passion fruit flavor in February, and it sells very well, according to a Costco representative who, under company rules, cannot be directly quoted.

In a typical week Hawaii Costco stores sell between \$10,000 and \$15,000 worth of the product. During a special event when all three flavors were available, more than \$100,000 worth of brittle sold in two weeks, the spokesman said. The passion fruit

flavor is the mainstay, and the other flavors are available on a rotating basis.

Sam's Club has been doing business with Ching's Hawaii Gourmet Cookies business for years, and Island Lava Bakers Brittle was introduced in its wholesale stores in October 2014, according to Dianna Gee, senior manager of media relations.

"We now carry five of the company's products in both of our clubs in Hawaii," she said, adding that all the products have been "extremely well received," to the point that the company's regional buyer brought them to Puerto Rico, where they are now carried in Sam's 11 locations there.

Companies such as Ching's usually get their products onto Sam's Club shelves via its road show events, Gee said, which set up temporary sales sites within a store. Road shows give customers access to unique, high-quality items outside Sam's normal stock, she said, and "can also be a great way for small businesses to introduce a product that might not be ready for production on a larger scale." (Companies who'd like to be part of a road show should talk to a local Sam's Club store manager, Gee said.)

Customers eat the bakers brittle right out of the bag, place it atop ice cream or yogurt, crush it to use as a pie or cheesecake crust, or even employ it in breading for fried chicken, Ching said.

Given the demand and his desire to expand, Ching, a Kamehameha Schools graduate, is working on a way to boost production through the use of a tunnel oven, which would speed the baking process. His ability to serve additional clients depends on it, he said.

He also has ideas for expanding the product line beyond typical snacks. He has his eye on underutilized crops, such as breadfruit. "I plan to use other Hawaii products in different ways."

Despite the fissures he has hurdled in business, "Hawaii gave me so much, and this is one way I can think of getting into the mainstream some products from Hawaii that aren't really mainstream today."

"I have hope, and when I get to that place, then that will be success."

Costco vendor inquiries: costco.com (click on "vendors and suppliers"); Sam's Club inquiries: corporate.walmart.com (click on "suppliers")