

Former Mr. Jelly Belly Hopes To Regain Candy Crown

COVINA, Calif. (AP) — He's the Willie Wonka of this small suburban town east of Los Angeles, the rotund man in the T-shirt and shorts who joyfully takes just about anybody who walks through the door on a tour of his tiny candy factory.

But David Klein was once much more.

The confectioner, who these days makes a comfortable living selling various chewy, crunchy concoctions with funny names like Candy Barf and Zombie Heart (the latter squirts strawberry-flavored "blood" when you bite into it), was once at the center of a sweet-tooth revolution.

He was Mr. Jelly Belly.

In 1976 Klein launched the gourmet jelly bean craze when he improbably envisioned that people would be willing to pay 10 or 20 times more for jelly beans if they simply tasted better, came in scores of natural flavors and had a clever name.

Then, with only \$800 in hand, he somehow talked a small, family-run candy company in the San Francisco Bay area into going into business with him.

The result was the Jelly Belly, a precociously flavorful little gob of sugar, syrup and corn starch that quickly became the favored treat of millions, including President Ronald Reagan.

And Klein, a one-time nut distributor who had begun selling his creation in just one candy store, was the gourmet bean's mascot.

Decked out in a Jelly Belly-bejeweled top hat and a matching white cowboy suit, he was everywhere in the late 1970s.

He was photographed for People magazine sitting in a bathtub filled with Jelly Bellies, some stuck to his hairy chest, others lodged between his toes. He dropped by TV programs like "The Mike Douglas Show" to trade quips with the host and cajole the celebrity guests into sampling his new flavors.

Then, for reasons Klein still has trouble coming to terms with, he and his partner sold their interest in the Jelly Belly name in 1980 for \$4.8 million. He collected his half of the money in monthly installments over 20 years, and he faded into obscurity.

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"I went from hero to zero in about 60 seconds," the usually upbeat candy maker says morosely when the subject is raised. "I was Mr. Jelly Belly for four years. And then ...," his voice trail off.

While Jelly Bellies were being passed around the table at Reagan administration Cabinet meetings and carried into outer space by astronauts in the 1980s, Klein was trying in vain to come up with another big thing.

He brought out a version of sugar-free salt water taffy. He tried to hit it big with sour licorice until more well-heeled competitors squeezed him out. He pioneered gross-out candy with a chocolate bar shaped to look like — well — you get the idea. It never caught on.

Through it all, he moped about his and his late partner's decision to sell their 50-50 interest in Jelly Belly to the Herman Goelitz Candy Company, which renamed itself the Jelly Belly Candy Company.

"It caused a lot of pain in the family," says his son, Bert Klein, who produced the documentary "Candyman: The David Klein Story." So much so that his son, a veteran Hollywood film animator, says that as a child he stopped telling people his father had ever been Mr. Jelly Belly. It was too painful and most people didn't believe him anyway.

Now, with another holiday candy season upon us, Klein is back and hoping, at age 65, to regain the mojo that once made him the talk of the candy world.

His company, Can You Imagine That!, is working with Leaf Brands in developing a new treat called Farts. (Yes, you read that right.)

Leaf, which created Milk Duds, plans to have Farts in stores by Christmas, and when it does Klein predicts they will make people forget all about Nerds, a similar looking but crunchier candy.

Then there is Dave's Signature Beyond Gourmet jelly beans. They will mark Klein's return to the candy bean business with such exotic flavors as ginger, jalapeno and bacon. He's predicting they will also make people wonder what they ever saw in Jelly Belly, a company with which his relations have grown increasingly acrimonious over the years.

Klein has long maintained that Jelly Belly's chairman, Herman G. Rowland Sr., bullied him into selling out at a rock-bottom price so he could have the Jelly Belly empire all to himself. It's an allegation Rowland emphatically denies.

"I loved Dave," Rowland said recently from his office in Fairfield, before quickly adding he wanted to make sure his listener had heard him correctly: He had said "loved," not "love."

Still, Rowland chuckles often when he recalls the heady, early days of Jelly Belly and the promotional schemes Klein would come up with.

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He acknowledges it was Klein's idea to call the candy Jelly Belly, a name Rowland didn't think much of at the time. He thought even less of the portly Klein's decision to be photographed naked in a bathtub full of jelly beans.

"When I saw that thing, I went, 'Oh my God, this is the end of Jelly Belly. No one will ever want to eat one,'" he recalls with a laugh. "Well, I was wrong."

He only pressed to buy Klein out, he says, after learning he had given his late partner half of his Jelly Belly distribution business and his partner in turn had trademarked the product's name. He realized then, Rowland said, that if he didn't buy Jelly Belly the name could be taken to any other candy maker.

Meanwhile, Jelly Belly had become so popular that the small company Rowland's great-grandfather had founded in 1869 was struggling to keep up with production while spending money to expand so it could make more Jelly Bellys, which it sold only through Klein.

"Now maybe he doesn't know these things or maybe he doesn't remember them," Rowland said. "But I protected his a-- completely."

Klein, for his part, says he does understand.

But then he thinks again of those days when he'd put on his Mr. Jelly Belly costume and go on television. And he becomes wistful and wishes he'd never relinquished the name. If he hadn't he figures he'd still be Mr. Jelly Belly.

"Col. Sanders created a product and when he sold it he was still Col. Sanders," Klein says earnestly. "His picture was still on the buckets and everything."

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