

Michigan Candy Maker Credits Success to Nostalgia

ZLATI MEYER, Detroit Free Press

DETROIT (AP) — The company best known perhaps for its bumpy cake has had a recent journey to success that's been anything but.

Sanders bounced back from near-oblivion to become a growing national player in desserts and candy. The 139-year-old iconic Michigan candy company seems to be everywhere — Delta Air Lines flights, Costco, on an episode of "Glee," Mackinac Island, U.S. Navy base stores and on the pillows at the MGM Grand Detroit.

The confectioner, also known for its ice cream and hot fudge topping, has seen double-digit sales growth over the last three years, fueled in part by native Michiganders buying the products they remember from their childhoods, said company President Ron Rapson, who said annual sales are about \$25 million.

"We've been branching out over the last five years from a more regional basis to more national basis. What prompted it was our desire to get great products into more customers' hands. Over the last decade, a lot of Michiganders have exited the state. As we've gone and done shows nationally, we get recognized by those old Michiganders. It's an amazing phenomenon," he said. "We have wonderful products we think can compete."

Sanders competes against Godiva on Macy's shelves and with Russell Stover at chain stores like Kroger, the [Detroit Free Press](#) [1] reported.

More than a million of its dark sea salt and caramel chocolate candies are served tens of thousands of feet in the air on Delta flights and a contract with MGM Grand Detroit puts as many as 300,000 pieces of chocolate on hotel pillows each year. The new contracts will only add to Sanders brand exposure and audience.

To handle its recent surge in sales, Sanders expanded. Its new distribution center in Clinton Township is 50,000 square feet — 30,000 square feet larger than the old one — and the workforce has grown by 10 percent over the last 18 months.

The chocolates and dessert sauces continue to be made at Sanders' 70,000-square-foot factory in the township; the cakes and deep-dish brownies are produced at Minnie Marie Bakers in Livonia.

Sanders is growing its product line, too, as a nod to healthy eating. Earlier this year, the company introduced gluten-free fruit and snack dips as part of its new Orchard Collection products that have no additives or sweeteners. Formulated slightly differently than the dessert toppings that are Sanders' biggest seller, Rapson likened them to Marzetti Dessert dips.

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"We wanted great products available for other parts of people's diets. Fruit with a bit of our chocolate sauce or caramel sauce. It goes well with salty snacks, too," he said. "They're wholesome ingredients, fresh cream, fresh butter."

Despite Americans' growing awareness of what they eat — raw foods, no-carbs, gluten-free, locally-grown, etcetera — chocolate and candy makers continue to have sweet success. According to the National Confectioners Association, total U.S. confectionery sales were \$33.6 billion, \$20.6 billion of which was chocolate.

In the trade group's most recent data, chocolate candy sales were up 4.1 percent and non-chocolate candy sales, 2.4 percent. And 75 percent of the group members are smaller companies that have been around for 75 or 100 years, and in some instances are being run by the second, third, fourth or fifth generations.

"Candy is a part of people's happy lives," said Sanders spokeswoman Susan Whiteside. "Consumers are more interested in their food now than ever before. They want to know where it comes from, who made it, how it was sourced. Some of the regional companies have benefited from that interest in food, as the country has (become) more foodie."

Perhaps that's what helped revive Sanders. The brand began struggling in the late 1970s and early 1980s. Morley Candy Makers started manufacturing some Sanders products in the 1990s, when Sanders was in the final stages of closing down its Highland Park factory and all of its retail stores. Morley bought the brand in 2002.

Rapson wants to position his sweets as what you enjoy when you decide to let loose a bit: "The fine line is most people like to indulge a little bit. If you're indulging, why not indulge in the best products? If you're going to have a glass of wine, have a nice glass of wine. If you're going to have sweets, have Sanders hot fudge. People like to reward themselves. Personally, I'm health conscious. I exercise, but every day, I have hot fudge, and it's a wonderful addition to my diet."

Though he pointed out that chocolate is made from cacao beans and therefore natural, he stopped short of calling chocolate a health food.

"Of course, anything in excess isn't good for you, but chocolate is here to stay for sure," he said. "Chocolate makes people feel good. It's made people feel good for a long time. Chocolate historically has been given as a gift ... It brings joy to someone."

Holiday Market in Royal Oak has been selling Sanders boxed chocolates and sauces for years, alongside about 40 types of chocolate from a variety of makers, like Ghirardelli, Lindt and Berkley-based Sydney Bogg's Sweet Essentials.

Owner Tom Violante, a self-confessed Pecan Titan addict, said he likes that they make a quality product, are a local company and have a competitive price point ("right under Godiva").

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"When I was a kid, the biggest thrill I had was my mom would take me into a Sanders store and I'd get a Boston cooler and I was absolutely the best boy in the world," Violante said. "Nostalgia plays a big role."

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