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Locals sweet on Kimmie Candy From Reno Gazette Journal 5.14.07

Factory plans to offer tours in September by: Zamna Avila

Move over Willy Wonka, Kimmie Candy is in town. Soon, children of all ages will be able to tour its' factory, and they won't even need a golden ticket.

Kimmie Candy Co. is a southeast Reno manufacturing company specializing in candy-coated, chocolate covered sweets. Sunbursts, ChocoRocks, and Baby Dino Eggs are among its most popular product lines.

"Our customers are amazed that a company making products that nice is here in Northern Nevada," said Mike Marantette, owner of the gourmet grocery, gift basket, and catering business, Napa Sonoma, on Moana Lane. Marantette has been purchasing the factory's candy for his shop.

Joseph Dutra, president and chief executive officer of Kimmie Candy, purchased the factory in 2004, moved his offices in 2005, finished restructuring the building and bringing in equipment by 2006 and began limited production of his goods early this year, with partial production in Korea. Dutra is planning to launch the full production of his line of candies by June and set up a retail area, which will include tours by fall.

"It will be a little like Willy Wonka (Factory)," said Dutra, referring to the fictional candy factory in the popular 1964 children's book "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory," by Roald Dahl. "We will show all our ingredients, how the chocolate is made, an interactive area where we'll teach the history of chocolate, then how we make and package our candy. And, if families want, they can purchase our candy from our retail shop."

Dutra, 54, is a third generation farmer from the Sacramento area. In 1999, one of the salesman who worked for an agricultural company owned by Dutra, Westec Inc., told him about a container that was left in a San Francisco dock. The shipment was full of chocolate-covered sunflower kernels that were brought to the United States from Korea, and a buyer had reneged on his contract to purchase the coated seeds.

The entrepreneur did some research on the candy business, found it was very family-oriented and decided to take a chance on the product.

"I became more enamored with the concept of having a business that was family-run," he said, "I thought I might as well diversify, so I bought the container."

Along the way, Dutra changed the formula for the chocolate and the type of sunflower kernel, taking the concept and developing it into a product line. While there were initial challenges establishing Kimmie Candy in the candy-making industry and gaining the trust of distributors as a viable business, the company eventually took off.

"In a way, I feel I've been fortunate to live a little bit of the American dream in developing a company that employs people, allows you to move forward and grows," he said. "When my grandparents came to this country from the Azore Islands of Portugal, they had no money. With each generation, we get better."

Dutra began producing the candy in Sacramento and later moved his production to Korea. But, after the Sept. 11 attacks, Dutra decided to bring his business back to the U.S.

After careful research, he decided Reno was the place to set up shop.

"I chose Reno because of the climate, the lower costs of workers' compensation (insurance), and I believe the quality of life was better," he said. "The people in Reno are in a lot of ways better because, here, everybody seems like they want to succeed, and all of that is a great thing for a company coming into the Reno-Sparks area."

Marantette said he is glad Dutra chose this area.

"Their products go into all our 'Made In Nevada' gift baskets," Marantette said. "The baskets and the boxes we sell with the 'Made In Nevada' label are a big product line for us, and we are always looking for locally-produced products."

Shelly Sedran, who recently opened the Four Seasons House in Reno, said she read about Kimmie Candy in the Reno Gazette-Journal and on a web site that lists businesses carrying products made in Nevada.

Sedran decided to give the candy company a try because she sensed the products would be a good fit for her antique, home décor and gifts business, especially since the company is flexible in providing coated candy with colors for each season of the year. Plus, most travelers who visit her store find candy to be an inexpensive gift to take home, she said.

“(Kimmie Candy) is locally made, and I want to support other small businesses in the area because I know how hard it is to establish yourself,” Sedran said. “Candy is something everybody likes. They are very good to work with. They are willing to do whatever it is I need to fit into my store, and it is something unique and high quality.”

Dutra said he looks forward to having his business give back to Reno through charitable work and as a promoter of tourism.

“Because Reno doesn’t really have a candy factory, what we can do is be like a little tourism place for Reno,” Dutra said.

Marketing coordinator Karen Ferjusen said she is excited about the prospect of leading tours around the candy factory.

“If it is kids, food and candy, it’s gotta be great because that’s what it’s all about,” Ferjusen said.

And, although Dutra doesn’t wear a top hat like Willy Wonka, he defiantly wears more than one hat in local and international business.

Aside from the candy factory, he also continues to manage Westec, and he is promoting a third business, FreeWater Inc., which manufactures atmospheric water generators.

Dutra’s hope is that one day, his son, John, 23, and his daughter, Kathryn, 25, who both help out with the business in their spare time, will some day take over and continue building the American dream, he said.

“I see that my son and daughter will take what (my wife) Marina and I have made and make it better,” he said.

“We are a little, fun company, and we have a lot of interesting concepts.”

