



The Buzz

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Sweet tooth lures dentist from filling teeth to filling orders

Mike Purdy tried for a year to hide the fact that he was a dentist by day and made chocolates by night. "When people did start finding out I was doing this, my practice doubled," he said.

The **Island Princess** founder figures it was because people realized he was a normal guy who also ate candy and wouldn't scold them for eating it. He did both dentistry and chocolate-making for four years.

There was a joke about putting business cards for his dentistry practice in each chocolate box, though he never did that, nor did he sell chocolates from the office.

They were made and sold at Maui's Best, a store Purdy and his wife Gwen set up in 1985 at the Kaahumanu Shopping Center.

Liberty House officials approached the company two years later, wanting to buy the line of candies "because they liked the packaging," Purdy said.

That proved an omen for future business experience in two ways.

Buyers for retail stores have instructed other vendors, including Island Princess' competitors, to copy the packaging, such as a clear jar with a paper skirt around the cap.

"We probably feel like we're the most imitated candy company in the state, and I say that with a certain amount of pride," said Purdy.

It was also the start of a lucrative private label manufacturing business.

"We didn't push the Island Princess name for years," Purdy said. "We were known in the industry for our private label work. We did a lot of work for our competitors," but he wouldn't name them.

The Purdys closed up their retail operations by 2000 because it was too difficult to maintain the manufacturing, wholesaling and retail operations, he said.

They decided to emphasize marketing to the kamaaina market.

"We were growing very well, over 10 percent upwards to 20 percent per year up until Sept. 11. We were on a roll," Purdy said.

His export customers are heavily dependent on the tourism industry. The downturn in travel to Hawaii from Asia also hurt. Recovery is going well, though the war was a concern, and SARS has presented another economic stumbling block.

Nevertheless, the company recently unveiled a new product called "Deluxe" in a more-than-one-pound, oversized box containing 42 macadamia nuts coated with English toffee and two layers of chocolate with a suggested retail price of about \$20.

The nuts are larger-than-average as well. Only 1 percent of Island Princess' 1,000-acre crop makes it into the box, designed by Elbert Tsuchimoto of E T Graphic Design.

"It's very artsy, not touristy," Purdy said.

The former dentist used the word "cavities" to describe the pukas in the tray that hold the chocolates. He didn't do it on purpose.

Despite its use in many of its products, Purdy doesn't consider his company to be a chocolate company.

"We're not in the chocolate business. We're in the gift business. When we design a new product it has to be something you would want to take to your mother, girlfriend, husband or someone special," he said.

A new product line is to hit store shelves June 1.

"It's a cute product nobody else has. It's just a new twist on a product that's been around for awhile," he said.

What is it?

"Oh, I can't tell you that," said Purdy. "We were followers and we really consider ourselves innovators now."