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MANUFACTURING

Retro gum gives consumers something to chew on

By Kevin Shalvey
PBN Staff Writer

For Providence-based manufacturer Verve Inc., maker of Glee Gum, sustainable production processes are as important as the product that makes it to the shelf.

"I think consumers are digging a little more deeply into the companies they're buying from. They're finding out what the companies' values are like and where their money's going," said founder and President Deborah Schimberg. "And, to me, being a customer has become a kind of political act."

Glee Gum, said Schimberg, is an attempt to please those consumers. It's made of ingredients like those originally used by major chewing gum producers such as Wrigley's and Cadbury Adams, including real chicle – sap from Sapodilla trees – for gum base.

Those companies' gum long has been made with a synthetic gum base instead, Schimberg explained. "After World War II, there was this explosion of demand, largely because G.I. soldiers took it in their rations," she said. The synthetic gum base made it easier to meet the growing demand, but "that was the end of the chicle business in Central America."

Glee Gum's packages boast that the gum is made with Central American chicle, "the way gum used to be made." Schimberg imports chicle from Mexico, Belize and Guatemala, where chicleros – chicle harvesters – hoist themselves up Sapodilla trees to harvest it.

"They make these crisscrosses, hatch marks, and the sap comes out of the tree. It looks a little bit like Elmer's Glue, that consistency, and it collects in the bags at the bottom," said Schimberg, who founded Verve Inc. in 1999. "They'll tap maybe 10 trees in a day."

By giving chicleros work, each \$1 box of gum – peppermint, tangerine or cinnamon – is increasing sustainable harvesting in Central America, Schimberg said.

"Really, the way the whole company got started is I was interested – am interested – in sustainable development," said Schimberg. "And I wanted to see how the market here, and in other industrialized countries, can be used to help support community development in the places where the raw materials come from."

Verve Inc. wasn't founded on Glee Gum, though. The first product was a "Make Your Own Chewing Gum Kit," complete with gum base, confectioner's sugar and flavor packets. Those kits stemmed from a vacation to Guatemala that Schimberg took during the 1990s.

She brought back a few 10-kilogram blocks of chicle, and her daughters cooked up gum in their Providence kitchen. The process they created was the foundation



PBN PHOTO / JAIME LOWE

Glee Gum creator Deborah Schimberg uses a photo to help explain the process of obtaining chicle, the base of her chewing gum. It's extracted from the sapodilla tree.

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of the first kit.

While those kits – along with similar ones for “gummies” and chocolate – are still available at Verve’s www.gleegum.com, Glee Gum is being marketed most aggressively through retail outlets. The gum is stocked nationally at Whole Foods Market, Trader Joe’s and Cracker Barrel – and has been sold in Restoration Hardware – and stocked locally in stores including The Coffee Exchange and White Electric Coffee.

Sustainable production isn’t the only draw for Glee Gum – unique, retro package design is another selling point, said Schimberg. The paper boxes – with 18 square pieces in each – are simple, with three basic colors and a jumping-man icon.

“We wanted to make a retro look initially, because of the fact that our gum is gum the way it used to be made,” she said.

For now, Verve Inc. farms out the production of its gum and products to a larger production facility. That’s because the little company – with just three employees – sold more than 1.5 million boxes of Glee Gum during 2006.

“It is only recently that we’ve begun to think about and work on marketing in a more concerted way, because until now it’s really been word of mouth,” said Schimberg. “And it will continue to be word of mouth – no pun intended.” •

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