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Family patiently brews up success with sassafras tea

3rd generation follows tradition

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Pappy's Sassafras Tea is made by H&K Products Inc. of Columbus Grove, Ohio.

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BOWLING GREEN — It takes somewhere from six to eight hours of brewing for sassafras root bark to give up its distinctive root beer-like flavor.

Nine months out of the year, Jeff Nordhaus has kettles of the stuff brewing at the small plant he runs just north of Columbus Grove in Putnam County.

His family has produced sassafras tea for more than five decades, going through tons of the root every year. It claims to be the only company in the world making real sassafras tea.

“A lot of people don’t believe we still do it the old-fashioned way, but essentially we use the same recipe we did in 1962,” he said.

Mr. Nordhaus is the third generation in the company, called H&K Products Inc. The business was started by his grandfather, Hermie Kerner, in 1958 in his Toledo garage. The business was incorporated in 1962 and moved to Columbus Grove, a village about 60 miles south of Toledo.

For nearly 40 years, the company’s sole product was its Pappy’s Sassafras Tea, a concentrate that must be mixed with water. Only in the early 2000s, after Mr. Nordhaus had returned to the company to help his parents, did H&K add green tea. Raspberry and peach tea followed more recently.

During production season, H&K cranks out 2,300 bottles a day. Mr. Nordhaus declined to say how much the company generates in sales, but said it sells approximately 500,000 bottles a year. More recently, Mr. Nordhaus, who serves as the company’s manager, has taken to actively marketing its concentrated teas.

“It’s not something we did for about 40 years. We let it sell largely by word of mouth,” he said. “But we’re trying to reinvigorate the company, give it a good shot in the arm, and let people know that we’re out there.”

On Thursday, Mr. Nordhaus’ roadshow visited the Agricultural Incubator Foundation north of Bowling Green. He was met by a small audience that included a couple of curious visitors who remembered drinking it in their youth and one who told him he remembered begging a grandparent to buy it for him many years ago. Others told him they were devoted lifelong fans.

Sassafras is a tree native to North America. The trees were prized for their roots, which have been used for medicinal purposes for centuries. Strict federal regulations ensure that Mr. Nordhaus can't sell it as a tonic, but he said many people still swear by the tea as something that can soothe an uneasy stomach.

"I can't make all the health claims per the FDA, but it's amazing how many people tell me, 'Don't ever stop making this,'" he said.

In the 1970s, the FDA classified safrole, an oil found in the root bark, as a carcinogen. Luckily for the company, Mr. Kerner developed a technique to make it safrole free.

The company is almost as curious for its operations as it is for its product.

The root bark comes not from commercial farms but from wildcrafters and mountain men from the Appalachians to the Ozarks.

"They dig blood root, ginseng, slippery elm, cohosh, and know there's a little plant in northwest Ohio that will buy all the sassafras root bark they can get," Mr. Nordhaus said.

"It's amazing the kind of people you work with, but they're honest as the day is long, and they're great people to work with."

Harvesting the root bark causes no permanent damage to the tree, though it's labor intensive. He pays on average \$10 a pound. Years ago, his grandfather offered to buy it by the shoe box full from children as a way to take care of people. Though the company gets less than it used to, boxes still arrive. Checks still go out.

H&K Products primarily sells its tea in the eastern United States, though its products can be found as far west as Arizona and Montana. In spite of that, the company has only four employees: Mr. Nordhaus, his father, and two others.

They do all brewing, bottling, and distribution out of Columbus Grove, in the same building the founder used. In fact, they even use the same stainless steel kettles, which get polished every day and bleached twice a day. Brewing sassafras, it turns out, is as messy as it is time consuming.

That's one reason Mr. Kerner started the company to begin with.

"He loved sassafras," his grandson said. "He drank sassafras his whole life, and he just got tired of keeping the bark simmering on the back burner. It made the house smell nice, but it ate up all his pots. It turns a pot purple."

They work nine months a year. It's too hot to brew in summer, and the downtime provides time for making repairs.

"It's very hot to fire those kettles up in June, July, and August," he said. "If you start working September through May, you can use the heat from the kettles to help heat the plant. Those are the kind of things we're about, how to do things as efficiently and cost effectively as we can."

And if you want a plant tour, there's no need to call. Just drop in and holler.

"Walk in unannounced and we're more than happy to give you, as dad calls it, the nickel tour," Mr. Nordhaus said.

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