Springfield Creamery

Long before the natural foods movement went mainstream, Springfield Creamery found its niche there, with its signature brand, Nancy's Yogurt, made with milk from local dairies, fruit from nearby farms, and natural sweeteners. The family-run company, with roots deep in 1960s counterculture, sells nationwide today. Annual sales exceeded $20 million in 2010.

Co-owner Chuck Kesey grew up in the milk business. His father, Fred, managed the Eugene Farmers Creamery and put Chuck and his brother, celebrated author Ken Kesey, to work there.

Chuck studied dairy science at Oregon State University (OSU), where he met his bride, Sue, who had a brain for business. They graduated in 1960, then returned to his hometown of Springfield, where they leased the defunct Springfield Creamery for $150 a month. The couple packaged milk and delivered it to stores, homes, and city schools.

By the end of the decade, they realized that if they wanted to stay independent the company needed a niche product. Chuck Kesey had a good idea: yogurt infused with the live bacteria cultures known as probiotics he studied at OSU.

The company's bookkeeper, Nancy Van Brasch Hamren, knew how to make yogurt. She and Chuck experimented and landed on a recipe that tasted fresh and tangy. They believe that theirs was the first U.S. creamery to use live *Lactobacillus acidophilus* cultures in yogurt.

The Springfield Creamery sold its first commercial batch to Willamette People's Co-op. When someone from the co-op called to order more, they asked: "Can you bring us some more of that Nancy's yogurt?" Nancy's sounded tastier than Chuck's yogurt, and the brand was born.

Ken Kesey's stature in 1970s youth culture rubbed off on Springfield Creamery, giving it a sort of hippie star power. Among those involved early was musician Huey Lewis, who operated a delivery service and trucked Nancy's Yogurt from Oregon to the San Francisco Bay Area.

In 1972, when the company was struggling, Chuck Kesey asked his friends in the Grateful Dead if they would play a benefit concert. Hand-drawn posters advertised the event for $3 in advance or $3.50 at the gate. The creamery turned Nancy's Honey Yogurt labels into concert tickets. On August 27, more than 20,000 free-spirited Deadheads rocked the sweltering afternoon away in Veneta, west of Eugene. The creamery raised from $12,000 to $13,000, enough to stay in business.

Though the company kept the Springfield name, it moved to a larger facility in Eugene in 1987. The creamery employs about fifty-five people, many of them family, including Chuck and Sue's son, Kit Kesey, who is in charge of operations, and their daughter, Sheryl Kesey Thompson, who markets the creamery's more than eighty products, from yogurt to cottage cheese to cultured soy.

The Springfield Creamery suffered a fire in 1994, which destroyed most of the plant. It rebuilt a facility three times larger and far more efficient than the old one, positioning it well for the growth of natural and organic foods in the years that followed.

Written by Katy Muldoon

Further Reading:

Muldoon, Katy. "Sometimes a Great Yogurt." *Sunday Oregonian*, March 28, 2010. http://www.oregonlive.com/O/index.ssf/2010/03/sometimes_a_great_yogurt_nancy.html.

Springfield Creamery. http://www.nancysyogurt.com/our_creamery/history.php.

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