

# One Hot Family Affair

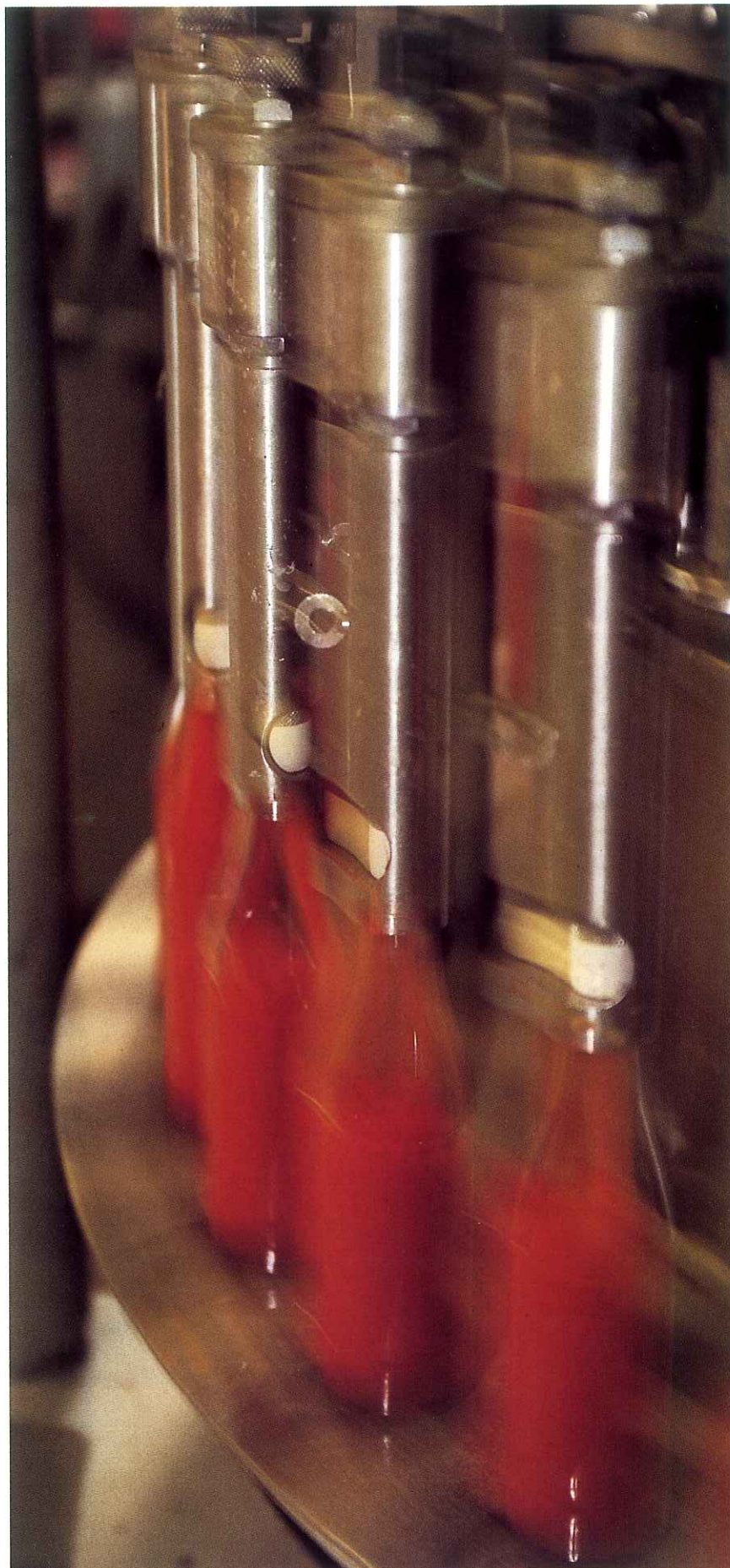


Think Texas Pete  
hails from the  
Lone Star State?  
Think again.

**Y**ou might think that spicy bottle of Texas Pete sitting in your kitchen cabinet is an El Paso import. Not so. The hot sauce that's graced Southern tables for decades comes right from the heart of North Carolina, conceived and developed in Winston-Salem by the Garner family.

For generations folks have sprinkled the fiery blend of peppers on cooked greens and barbecue, perked up field peas, and heated up

**Originally a by-hand process, the fiery sauce now pours high-speed into 3-ounce bottles (RIGHT). Reg Garner, president, (ABOVE, LEFT) and Hal Garner, secretary-treasurer, inspect the bottles.**





**(ABOVE) Beverly Barnett (left) and Mary Holmes unload the silver cans of Texas Pete chili sauce, which will soon bear the little-red-wrangler logo.**

all kinds of down-home cooking. And with the influx of Mexican, Thai, Chinese, and Caribbean foods throughout the state and region, the demand for the zesty sauce with the little red wrangler on the label is rising steadily. "People just keep on finding new uses for it," says Frank Sherrill, a member of the Garner clan that still runs the company today. "We're always getting surprised by our customers."

The piquant sauce begins with mixing and mashing hot red peppers, which are then aged for up to three years. This curing process allows the flavors to bloom, creating the delicately balanced taste that makes it unique. It's truly a precise science. If the sauce is too hot, the food gets overpowered. If it's too tame, why bother? Considering the success Texas Pete has found over the years, the Garner family's secret blend must be just right.

Their cookery faces a set of train tracks on an industrial portion of Indiana Avenue, where the old Garner family homestead used to stand. "Our grandfather actually named the road out front for kin we had in Indiana," comments Reg Garner, Frank's lanky cousin who heads the company. "Back then, this was all country."

According to family legend, when Reg and Frank's uncle, Thad Garner, graduated from high school in 1929, he bought an old barbecue stand and quickly earned a reputation for having the best sauce



around. (That famous recipe, scrawled on a greasy scrap of a brown paper bag, still sits at the plant under lock and key.) Another barbecue restaurant soon asked Thad to develop a spicier version of his popular original. The new concoction sold like hot tamales.

Once the new sauce was copyrighted and the Garner family established their food company, Thad, his father, and brothers wrestled over a new name. One marketing guru recommended they call it "Mexican Joe" to capitalize on the popularity of south-of-the-border food. But the family wanted to keep their recipe American. How about something Texan, one brother suggested. Okay, but Texas what? How about Pete, said another brother who sported that nickname. It had a ring to it, Texas Pete. Of course, such a brand meant there had to be a cowboy on it, and with the advent of TV, their little red wrangler was lassoing his way onto the old Cisco Kid show in promo spots. Later, his figure whizzed around racetracks,

painted on championship stock cars. Now he flies on banners at various local sporting events.

Soon after the company's inception, the Garners branched out and began making jellies. The incentive came during World War II, when the government needed the sweet stuff for troops stationed at Fort Bragg. These days, employees cook 14 different flavors of jellies and preserves. "Grape jelly is most popular," says Frank. "It makes up 50% to 55% of the jelly sales."

The molten, syrupy mixture bubbles and boils in huge stainless steel containers in the original part of the plant. The chili sauce, which was the first canned chili in the United States, gets mixed in those same giant caldrons. "At home you use the same pots and pans for every meal," says Frank matter-of-factly. "You wash them off and use them over and over. Well here we do the same thing. We flush sterilizing water through the pipes and wash the machinery. The equipment works different shifts, same as the employees."

In addition to the hot sauce, jellies, and chili, the T.W. Garner Plant also churns out a seafood cocktail sauce, a honey mustard sauce that's great for chicken fingers, and even a spicy buffalo wing sauce.

Clearly, the company's always operated as a family affair. In the beginning, extended family members bottled the barbecue sauce themselves, working in the kitchen of an old hospital, where they lived in the former wards. Thad and his father drove through the Carolina countryside, selling the product from their car trunks and old, paneled truck beds. Other brothers ran the plant and kept the books. Eventually they built the plant on Indiana Avenue, which has been altered several times since then to support the company's continued growth.

Nowadays, the new generation runs the business. In fact Reg and Frank can barely make it down office hallways without bumping into a relative. Reg's sister Ann Garner Riddle handles computer operations and quality assurance. Her cousin Harold Garner serves as secretary/treasurer, as his dad did for 40 years before him. And Glenn Garner, Harold's son, is the latest to



**Making jellies and hot sauce is a family activity for (from left) Glenn Garner, Harold Garner, Ann Riddle, Reg Garner, and Frank Sherrill.**



join the business as a sort of jack-of-all-trades. "We're really not hung up on titles," says Harold, smiling. "We've each got our responsibilities, but we deal with things same as a family does—together." That sentiment prevails throughout the company. Many of their 50 employees have worked for the

company since the cousins were kids. The Garners laugh, remembering how they begged elders in the plant for a taste of the preserves, and how later, as teens, they helped process the fruit in the rush before it spoiled.

A couple of years ago, when then-Speaker of the House James Wright, Jr., of Texas, presented former President George Bush with a bag of pork rinds and a bottle of Texas Pete, the gifts made front-page news, locally and nationally. The *USA Today* story hangs neatly framed in the main company hallway, where touring visitors can't miss it. According to the report, President Bush asked why a product from Winston-Salem, North Carolina, was named Texas Pete. Frank smiles when he quotes Wright's retort: "It's the same reason that someone who lives in Kennebunkport, Maine, can claim to be a Texan." Touché, and score one for the red Tar Heel wrangler.

*Elizabeth Weigand*