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texas spice in the twin city



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North Carolina

some like it

by chris gigley

illustration by kyle webster

In 1929, the Garner brothers created Winston-Salem-based Texas Pete. Today, the family's signature sauce is growing into a national powerhouse.



North Carolina

KTW

he decision was made on a whim, really. Thad, Harold, and Ralph Garner had just developed a hot sauce for the Winston-Salem barbecue business Thad purchased in 1929, and they needed a name for their new concoction.

The three brothers gathered with their father, Samuel, to brainstorm. Spicy was — and is — a signature of Mexican food, so on first impulse the brothers came up with “Mexican Joe.”

The patriarch didn’t like it. Samuel insisted on something more American — perhaps “Texas” something. Texas Joe? Texas Tom? Samuel glanced at Harold, whose nickname was Pete. Texas Pete!

The name was unanimously adopted, and an enduring brand was born.

Then, as now, the TW Garner Food Company fielded questions regularly about its core brand. Why was this hot sauce, a staple in barbecue joints across the Carolinas and the Southeast, not called Carolina Pete, or even Dixie Pete?

“There are a lot of brands and products that don’t have a relationship to where they’re made or even to the product itself,” says Frank Sherrill, TW Garner’s vice president of sales and a first cousin to the Garner family. “We jokingly say that there’s no ham in hamburger

either. But knowing where the name came from, we have pride in it.”

Garner-grown sauce

Sherrill is part of the second wave of Garners steering the Texas Pete brand into the 21st century. Company President Reg Garner and Vice President Ann Garner Riddle are Ralph’s children. Hal Garner, secretary and treasurer, is Harold’s son.

“Our heritage is always very much on our minds,” says Reg. “We are responsible to our aunts, uncles, cousins, nieces, and nephews. We may not be publicly traded, but we take our responsibilities seriously to our family members, who are shareholders, and to our customers.”

That sense of responsibility has pushed the second generation of Garners to expand distribution far beyond the Southeast to grow the Texas Pete product line to include other condiments such as honey mustard and a seafood cocktail sauce. Most recently, the company added two new versions of its original hot sauce, a garlic hot sauce, and a “hotter” hot sauce.

“The rich pepper flavor comes out in everything,” insists Ann. “We age our peppers, which is what gives our sauce its unique flavor. A lot of other companies don’t because of the added expense. There’s an annual investment to buy peppers and keep them for two to two-and-a-half years.”

The effect of aging, says Sherrill, is the same on peppers as it is on grapes. “There’s a fermentation process that brings out the heat and flavor in peppers,” he explains. “The bonus is that aging our peppers protects us from bad years. It’s not like tomatoes, which are grown from year to year and each crop gets used up. The aging process means we’re always maintaining ample supplies of peppers.”

Branding and expanding

That’s vital, because the last thing the company needs right now is a pepper shortage. TW Garner is fighting an ongoing battle for grocery-store shelf space in the Southeast as it expands into places like New England and the West Coast.

“Grocers know they have a commodity, and that commodity is space,” says Sherrill. “So they want to make sure they have products that sell best and give them the highest return. We have to do a good job of convincing them that our products will do that for them.”

Meanwhile, the company has learned that it must make its products affordable. Sherrill says demographic information TW Garner has collected shows consumers tend to use Texas Pete products on more modestly priced foods, which corresponds to the company’s effort to price its hot sauce below its competitors.

WESTWARD HO?

With its customer base becoming increasingly national, would the TW Garner Food Company ever consider leaving Winston-Salem? Not likely.

“This is where we live and grew up,” says Frank Sherrill, TW Garner’s vice president of sales. “Winston-Salem is also pretty geographically centered to where our products are sold, so distribution costs much less than it would if we were in Iowa and had to ship our products here.”

Data the company gathered shows that the bulk of hot sauce consumption is up and down the East Coast, and the company’s location near the center of the Eastern seaboard makes freight costs manageable. Then there’s the home base itself.

“People are always moving into the South,” says Sherrill. “Statistics show it’s where everyone is going, so we need to protect and grow that base, too.”





The company also relies on its own consumer research to determine where and how to market the Texas Pete line. During the past five years, TW Garner has delved deeply into sports marketing, co-branding Texas Pete with the likes of the Southeastern Conference and the Atlanta Braves, and making significant advertising investments with Major League Baseball and the National Football League.

"We were also involved in auto racing and had lot of success there until the prices got too high and we had to allocate our money elsewhere," says Sherrill. "Now we have a promotion running with an outdoors show on cable television. It's a cooking show, but they're cooking in wild game."

Wherever the Texas Pete cowboy is displayed, the event or team or occasion has been carefully chosen based on the information TW Garner has harvested from its consumers.

"We do a lot of non-sports promotional activities, too," says Hal. "We sponsored the Twin City Ribfest here. We were one of the primary sponsors of the Big Apple Barbecue Block Party in New York City this past June. We've done Southern women's shows throughout the Carolinas. We try to reach a lot of people in a lot of places."

While these efforts will help the future of the brand, its iconic status was secured by decisions made by the original Garner brothers and their father more than a half century ago. First, they developed a sauce that is unique in its ability to complement flavors instead of burn them away.

"We market Texas Pete as a hot sauce with flavor," says Ann. "It has enough heat to give it some zest, but it's not so hot that people can't enjoy it."

The sauce, therefore, has a broad appeal. Sherrill says company research has shown that hot sauce is consumed predominantly on the East Coast, and Texas Pete quickly gained a loyal following in New England when the company expanded its distribution there. "New Englanders eat a lot of seafood, and Texas Pete is a good enhancement to seafood," explains Ann. "It doesn't cover up the flavor. It just enhances it and brings out other spices that are already there."

A faceless icon

The founders also created a lasting logo. The Texas Pete cowboy has remained virtually unchanged since being enhanced sometime in the 1950s. The original caricature had a Roy Rogers-like face.

"When we started out with these products, the cowboy was an all-American icon," says Hal. "Cowboy movies were popular then. The cowboy was a symbol of rugged individualism, and it didn't seem out of place

BEATING THE HEAT

The Scoville scale, developed by American chemist Wilbur Scoville in 1912, measures the "hotness" of chili peppers. The more Scoville heat units (SHU), the hotter the sauce; and many companies have taken pride in listing high ratings on their bottles.

Texas Pete, on the other hand, has carved a niche for itself by appealing to milder palates. Its Scoville rating is 1,500, while the rating for regular Tabasco sauce ranges between 2,500 and 5,000. The hottest pepper in the world is the Naga Jolokia from India, which has a Scoville rating ranging from 855,000 to 1,041,427.

to adopt a cowboy as a symbol. It wasn't just a Western image. It was an all-American image."

While other companies, from Michelin to Pillsbury, were also using caricatures to push their brands, the Texas Pete icon had several advantages. First, it was red, an eye-catching color. Second, the updated version was faceless, allowing consumers to envision the cowboy to "be whoever they imagined him to be," says Ann.

"Whoever thought of using a caricature of a cowboy was forward-thinking," says Sherrill. "We didn't do it intentionally, but we've built a recognizable figure that conjures up positive memories of our products. It puts a lot of images in consumers' minds and ingrains our products into their lifestyles."

The "Texas Pete" script has also remained consistent through the years. The only elements of the logo that have changed are the color and outline of the cloud in the background and the addition of chili peppers at the base of the cloud.

"People recognize the cowboy, and I think it draws them to our sauce," says Hal. "It's multigenerational. We've talked with consumers who tell us they grew up with our products and are now feeding them to their kids."

The Garners know a thing or two about passing on traditions to young generations. Reg's son, Heyward, and Hal's son, Glen, joined the company right out of college and are working their way up the ladder just like their fathers did. Soon, it will be their turn to protect the family's legacy and field the familiar question from consumers, "Why the name 'Texas Pete' for a sauce from North Carolina?" Thanks to their family-focused upbringing, these future leaders will surely have an answer. **WS**