



HANDMADE: Lee Swinson (right) mixes the ingredients for the Carolina Crisp candy bar by hand, but he may soon automate the bar's production. Automation would likely give him more control over the process, as well as a more consistent product.

The candy man can

By RICHARD DAVIS

LEE Swinson has always been a farmer. But farmers are businesspeople too, and it doesn't take long to recognize Swinson is a young man with a natural talent for business.

For the past couple of years Swinson has been building his Golden Grove Candy Co. and formulating, packaging, manufacturing and promoting his Carolina Crisp candy bar. He started out with a few stores carrying the bar in just a few counties. Now he has buyers in three states and soon in two European countries.

"Farmers have people on one end of the spectrum telling them what they have to pay for their input costs. On the other end of the spectrum, they have

Key Points

- This farmer uses candy bars to sell his peanuts.
- Candy bar offered the greatest potential for customers.
- His goal: Use entire peanut crop for value-added products.

people telling them what they will get paid for their product. I wanted more control of my situation myself," Swinson says. "When I grow peanuts, I want to capture more of the profit in the production myself. I can do that with the candy bar."

Swinson farms near Warsaw, N.C., on the family farm with his father, Vic, and grandfather Nick. He's 27 now but started driving the tobacco cropper through the field when he was 5 or 6 years old. Demonstrating

his business acumen at an early age, he rented his first farm on his own when he was 12 and farmed it with his dad's equipment.

Once out of high school he went to a community college for a couple of years, but he wanted to farm, and under his father's guidance the farm was growing — so there was a great opportunity and place there for him.

Peanut perfect

Today, the Swinsons plant around 2,800 to 2,900 acres of corn, 1,600 to 1,700 acres of peanuts, 400 acres of tobacco and 500 acres of cotton. They've got a few soybeans on their heavier land, and they've planted some rye and wheat on their lightest land.

He and his dad share the farming responsibilities for the various crops, but Swinson pretty much looks after the peanuts himself. He sprays them, scouts them, digs them and harvests them. That is fine with him — he's always had a sweet spot in his heart for goobers.

"I wanted to grow peanuts for years, even before they did away with the federal allotment system," he says. "In fact, the allotment system was the thing that always held us back. Once they did away with the allotment, I was all about growing peanuts.

"I have an uncle from Everetts, from the Baregrass area, and he grew peanuts," he adds. "When I was a kid, I always loved going out into the field, pulling some peanuts up and eating them. They're not like cotton or corn in the sense that just as soon as you dig peanuts, you can eat them. I always thought it was a good crop to grow and that it would grow well in this area — I thought that because that is what my uncle always told me."

The first year after the federal peanut program ended, Swinson was ready to go with peanuts. It wasn't long before he noticed that other people shared in his warm feeling for goobers.

During harvest that first year, he noticed how many people pulled up in their cars beside the field to watch the diggers work. The visitors wanted to walk behind the combine and pick up some free peanuts, or buy them.

"It didn't take me long to get an idea," Swinson says. "I got little bags that would hold like 3 or 5 pounds of peanuts. I free-bagged them, and when people came up wanting peanuts, I had them ready to sell. The thing was that was all so much fun to me. I enjoyed meeting the people and talking to them."

And he loved getting feedback on the crop that he loves to grow.

Launching a new product takes help

IN October of 2007, Lee Swinson made a decision to use the peanuts he was producing on his Warsaw, N.C., area farm to make and market a new candy bar, the Carolina Crisp. He's made great progress, but he says he's made some mistakes and spent more money than perhaps he had to. The fact is, learning the ropes in any new business is a sometimes painful process.

"They say hindsight is 20-20," Swinson says. "I wish I'd taken the time to look further ahead, but I didn't know the market would come as fast as it has. If you'd asked me eight months ago, I would have said it wasn't coming fast enough. Now I have so many customers, and I see the potential."

He's hoping to get started on expanding to meet the demand as soon as possible.

When he first went out to introduce the candy to store owners, he really didn't know what to expect.

"When I went in to see them, I was just in the dark," he says. "I told them I was a farmer, told them what I was doing and showed them the candy bar."

A helpful turn in the road came when he found some friends in the candy and packaging industries who were willing to fill him in.

A link back to farming

"I got to know some good people who really helped me out and who believed in what I was doing," Swinson says. "Now whenever I go to a new store, I can pretty much tell them what they want to know. And I still tell them about the farming because everybody has a tie back to farming in some way, whether it is their parents or grandparents that used to farm or a friend whose uncle used to farm and they'd go visit with him. When people find out I'm a farmer and I'm making a candy bar, too, they really open up and try to help me out with it. Knock on wood, but I haven't been to a store yet where after meeting with them they didn't buy my product."

These days Swinson has wholesalers for distribution and brokers to help him promote his candy bar. But he still makes as many phone calls and visits to stores as he can. After all, no matter how helpful these others are, no one is as motivated to sell his candy and provide customer service as he is.

On the Web

VISIT the Golden Grove Candy Co. Web site to find store locations where the Carolina Crisp candy bar is sold. There is also information on other Golden Grove products and corporate gifts on the site. In addition to Carolina Crisp, the Swinsons are selling Carolina Crisp Bites, Peanut Brittle, Blister Fried Peanuts and Salted In-Shell Peanuts.

You can also learn about food shows and other upcoming events at the site, www.goldengrovecandy.com.

