Select Group Tours St. Paul's Pearson Candy

TOM WEBB, St. Paul Pioneer Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — Visiting a candy factory is a popular childhood dream, a tale retold by Willy Wonka, Curious George and Lucille Ball.

But in real life, anyone hoping to visit Pearson's Candy Co. in St. Paul has been out of luck. The famed candymaker on West Seventh Street hasn't offered tours for decades, preferring that its Nut Goodies and Salted Nut Rolls tell its story.

Until now.

Last week, Pearson's finally cracked open the factory doors to a select group of visitors — contest winners, retirees and news media — and hinted that public tours might resume.

The company isn't making any promises, but it totally grasps the interest.

"It appeals to the kid in all of us," Michael Keller, Pearson's new president and chief executive officer, told the St. Paul Pioneer Press [1]. After a test run of tours, he said, "We'll take stock and see if this is something we can do going forward."

Keller is a natural showman who led the tours wearing a Willy-Wonka-style outfit of vivid greens, reds and creams — all colors associated with the Nut Goodie. His outfit was topped off with a caramel-colored hat, and he welcomed visitors alongside Pearson's furry new mascot, Goodie the Squirrel.

The whimsical change in tone is being driven by Pearson's new owners, who are looking to enliven a 101-year-old brand. This year, Pearson's will introduce four new candy products, including a Salted Almond Roll that goes into production this month, and a chocolate-covered Marshmallow Elf, a seasonal item for Christmas.

Even wacky ideas are under consideration.

"We're looking at marshmallow body parts for Halloween," Keller said with a grin. The candy coating would be "slime green."

All this marks a new day for a company long known for four core products: Salted Nut Rolls, Mint Patties, Nut Goodies and Bun Bars, the latter a regional favorite in the Ohio area.

Beyond new candy offerings, Pearson's is looking to expand in other ways. Its private-equity owners, Connecticut-based Brynwood Partners, which acquired Pearson's in 2011, is on the prowl for acquisitions in the candy sector. Has it found any?

"We have some in the pipeline," Keller replied, but he couldn't provide details. "Maybe we'll have some news to share in the future," he hinted.

One thing that won't change, Keller said, is Pearson's St. Paul base of operations. The company employs 110 workers in the plant, along with 40 staff. The factory has room to expand, so if all goes well, Pearson's will be "growing this business right where it is," he said.

Pearson's may rank as Minnesota's largest candymaker with $50 million a year in revenue, but it's still a fraction of the size of giants such as Mars and Hershey. It also competes with a growing roster of specialty candymakers, each seeking its niche.

As for the plant tour, last week's walk-through proved to be a study in contrasts. The sweet aroma of chocolate, mint, caramel and peanuts filled the air — as did the constant roar from the industrial machinery.

Candy production was a contrast, too. Workers guide machines that turned out a million mint patties per shift, but humans with sharp eyes still scan each patty for rejects, and still hand-craft the swirl on each Bun Bar.

There are even Lucy-and-Ethel-style candy packers (but without the hijinks) who pluck finished candies from a conveyor belt and place them into cartons. But unlike the famed "I Love Lucy" episode, the Pearson's workers are deft at their jobs.

The hairnet-clad visitors on the tour were a mix of retirees, news media and families who won a tour-the-candy-factory contest, which seemed inspired by the "Charlie and the Chocolate Factory" books.

"Since I've been at Pearson's, I've often been asked for two things: free candy and a tour of the plant," Keller said. "And so many requests for a tour of the plant that it started to make sense as a possible prize item for a promotion we were running."

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