

Flowers Under The Sun

The Vander Laans buy confectionery sunflowers from area farmers in North Dakota and South Dakota.

by Brenda Kleinjan

THE FARM WEST OF MOUND CITY, S.D., MIGHT well be described as off the beaten track, but tucked into one of the numerous buildings on the site is the home of Wild Dutchman Sunflower Seeds made by the father-son duo of Wayne and Tobey Vander Laan and their family.

Wayne Vander Laan made the first bag of sunflower seeds for his family in 2000. He then shared some bags with employees at the Campbell County Bank in Herried, S.D. Soon, the Vander Laans were producing more bags and selling them in the area.

"We never decided to get into. People just started liking the seeds, so we started selling them," Wayne said.

The Vander Laan family has been working on improving their snack food for the past five years.

"People like our seeds because they aren't too salty and have a good flavor," said Wayne, a member of Cam Wal Electric Cooperative in Selby, S.D.

Wayne developed his secret recipe through trial and error. Once he had refined his recipe, Wayne tested out three variations on employees at a local convenience store.

"Everyone agreed that the Number 2 bag was the best. It was the one I liked best, too," said Wayne. "I figured it was a good enough test."

The result is a sunflower seed that isn't overly salty. The mild salt flavor appeals to many repeat customers who hail from near and far – including a New York truck driver who orders the seeds for his cross-country hauls.

Along the way, the Vander Laans have received some help from their customers. One customer, a guy in California who loved the seeds, helped the Vander Laans find some of the equipment they needed for the commercialization of their business.

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Tobey notes that the seeds start out black and the roasting process lightens the seeds.

“The light area is where the skin peels off,” Tobey said.

The process the seeds go through is somewhat labor intensive, but for the Vander Laans, the results are worth the efforts.

First the seeds go through a cleaner which separates field debris and stalks. The cleaning process also sorts out small and extra large seeds, resulting in fairly uniform large seeds.

The seeds are then brought to a processing area where they are placed in one of three large baskets. Each basket holds about 150 pounds of seeds. The baskets are then boiled in a 400-gallon tank of water. The boiling process introduces salt, sugar and seasonings to the seed.

After bathing for 3-1/2 to 4 hours, the seeds are then spun dry in a large drier that looks like a really large home washing machine.

From the spin dry they are moved by a dolly-based auger onto an air dryer that the Vander Laans designed.

After drying for a while, the seeds are then augered into a high-tech roaster where they will roast for 1-1/2 hours. Each batch from the roaster will make approximately 150 13-ounce bags.

“We burnt a lot of seeds before we got it down,” said Wayne, with a laugh.

Before the seeds head for bagging, they take one more tumble in a cleaner which kicks the dust off the seeds. The dust is created by the shedding skins of the seeds.

The seeds then spend a couple of days cooling down in a hopper bin before they are bagged.

“The whole secret is getting the right heat and the right amount of doneness,” Wayne said.

“The boiled process is what makes ours taste better,” Wayne said.



Above: The Vander Laans buy confectionery sunflowers from area farmers in North Dakota and South Dakota. *Photo courtesy of National Sunflower Association*

Opposite: Tobey and Wayne Vander Laan stand next to their custom vat that can boil 450 pounds of sunflower seeds at a time in the 400-gallon tank.

Photo courtesy of Brenda Kleinjan/SDREA

The Vander Laans continue to look for retail outlets for their product, but they enjoy sales to dedicated customers around the country and those nearby.

One loyal customer is Cam Wal Electric manager Jeff Bonn, who was introduced to the seeds a few years ago.

“I like them because they’re not as salty and have a better quality,” said Bonn. “They’re also a cleaner seed and more flavorful.”

With a last name like Vander Laan, having a reference to their Dutch ancestry isn’t too surprising for their company name, but where exactly did the name come from?

“When we started the thing, we needed a name. A buddy of mine – who’s Norwegian – calls me the Wild Dutchman and I call him the Crazy Norwegian. I tell people that a Crazy Norwegian gave us the company name,” Wayne said.