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Noh Foods of Hawaii a family affair

By [Curtis Lum](#)
Advertiser Staff Writer

Growing up, Raymond Noh and his two brothers served as the unofficial taste-testers of their father's concoctions as the patriarch of the family experimented with dried seasonings and spices to develop the Noh brand.

Not every recipe worked, but the ones that did eventually wound up on store shelves as part of a large and growing line of Noh Foods of Hawai'i products. Since Edwin Noh made his first powdered kim chee mix more than 40 years ago, Noh Foods has added nearly 30 items and has been a pioneer in the packaged Asian seasoning industry.

"People would say to my father, 'Hey, Ed, how about trying to do a teriyaki mix or my favorite Chinese food is lemon chicken.' So literally for the next week, us three boys would have to taste and eat lemon chicken," said Raymond Noh, 49, president of Noh Foods.

Things haven't changed much over the years. The Nohs still rely on family members, friends and employees to approve a new product and don't bother with the more scientific test markets.

"For us, it's just having the right local flavor," Noh said.

The children of Korean immigrants, Edwin and Miriam Noh opened the Arirang Korean restaurant in 1961. The staple at any Korean restaurant is kim chee, but Raymond Noh said making it was labor-intensive.

Wanting to make life easier for his workers, Edwin Noh began experimenting with a powdered formula and he came up with just the right blend of spices. In 1963, the Nohs formed E&M Corp. to sell the new kim chee mix and later sold the restaurant to concentrate on the new venture.

The company had a modest start, but over the years Noh Foods has added 20 other seasoning mixes and 10 food items, such as haupia, barbecue sauce, a poke mix and a Hawaiian iced tea. The company also will launch 10 new items this year, including a bottled papaya seed salad dressing.

Noh Foods expanded to the Mainland when it opened a distribution office in Gardena, Calif., 25 years ago to distribute its product nationwide.

Raymond Noh said he has a distributor in Paris who orders a container of Noh products every two months and distributes the mixes throughout Europe. A restaurant owner in Florida regularly orders pounds of kim chee mix as a key ingredient in his happy-hour chicken wing recipe.

Noh did not want to reveal the company's annual sales, but said they've increased 300 percent over the past 24 years. As an example of how popular Noh products are, he said the company produces and sells about 2 million packages of the char siu mix alone each



Raymond Noh, president of Noh Foods, stirs a mixture of sesame seeds that will be ground and used in his packaged Korean Bar-B-Que mix. Noh Foods now has about 30 products.

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NOH FOODS

Founded: 1963 by Edwin and Miriam Noh

Headquarters: Kalihi

Other locations: Gardena, Calif., distribution office

Employees: 10 in Honolulu, eight in California

Produces: Wide range of food products including Asian seasonings, instant haupia, barbecue sauce, poke mix and instant Hawaiian iced tea

Top seller: Char siu powder (2 million packets a year)

year.

Noh's also recently began packaging larger, 3-pound bags of selected mixes, such as the haupia, for sale at club stores, restaurants, lu'au and schools.

"From March to April, all Mainland colleges that have Hawaiian clubs put on a lu'au and we sell them the haupia mix," Noh said.

Noh said it's taken a lot of hard work to get the Noh Foods name into the mainstream stores. Noh regularly attends trade shows across the country and spends two weeks out of each month traveling.

Twenty years ago, Hawai'i sales accounted for about 90 percent of the business, but Noh said sales on the Mainland now represent about 60 percent of the business. Sales through the Internet also are growing and allow Nohs to sell its mixes without having to fight to get the products on store shelves.

Although the product line and sales have grown, Noh Foods remains a small company. The Hawai'i operation has just 10 employees, while the California office has eight.

One big change is that the dehydrated powders used in the mixes are purchased wholesale and no longer made by hand by Edwin Noh. But the spices are still mixed by hand and packaged by a machine purchased 30 years ago.

Each day, a different flavor is mixed and packaged at Noh's Pu'uuhale Road warehouse, leaving a scent-of-the-day throughout the operation.

Noh said the keys to the company's success are the light packages that are easily packed and shipped, the ease in using the product and the versatility of the mixes. But mostly, Noh said, the sauces are popular because they taste good.

"The flavor of the product has to agree with the person, and we've been really fortunate with that, and again I credit my dad with having that real knack for flavors," Noh said. Edwin and Miriam Noh are "semi-retired," although Edwin makes regular visits to the office.

The Nohs continue to experiment and develop new products. An avid polo player, Raymond Noh said his greatest joy is knowing that people are enjoying his family's products.

"It's still a small family operation. We still have lots of growth potential ahead of us," Noh said. "I still continue to enjoy it and people seem to be very happy with the product. It's always nice to see the young generation that's going off to college for the first time and seeing them become new customers. Now they have to go out on their own and cook and try to emulate what mom has been feeding them all these years."

Reach Curtis Lum at culum@honoluluadvertiser.com.

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