

FAMILY TIES



T.J. Ethier, left, and Richard J. Haufe own Arcade Snack Co. in Auburn. The retail store is filled with nuts, snacks and holiday tins.

From beginning, Arcade Snacks' commitment to customers has been a constant

BY BILL THOMAS | PHOTOGRAPHY BY RICK CINCLAIR

Aw, nuts.
And snack mixes, dried fruit,
candy and confections.
You've heard of from rags to
riches. How about from basement
to warehouse?

Arcade Snack Co., at 205 Southbridge St. on the outskirts of Auburn, is emblematic of a family-run,

up-by-the-bootstraps enterprise, with an aura of sweetness thrown in for good measure.

With a distribution system throughout New England and a retail store adjacent to its warehouse, Arcade Snacks represents more than three decades of sweat equity, family unity and entrepreneurial spirit.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 87



ABOVE: Lantei Lamptey combines nuts, chips and other ingredients in a mixer to create one of Arcade Snack's popular snack mixes. **RIGHT:** Freshly roasted cashews are inspected at Arcade Snack Co. **TOP:** Cashews tumble out of the roaster at Arcade Snack Co.

Richard J. Haufe was there when it all began in the basement of his stepfather's West Acton house in 1986. Haufe, brother T.J. Ethier and their parents would roast cashews, package them in cup-style containers, and sell them at a kiosk at Logan Airport in Boston. Through it all, there was the joy, struggle and conflict inherent in a clan striving to establish a livelihood under daunting circumstances.

Those circumstances included the death of founder George Arcade Ethier in 2013, leaving Rick Haufe to take the reins as its current president, with T.J. Ethier as the company's vice president. Meanwhile, Ann Ethier, co-founder and family matriarch, makes homemade candy for the store.

George Ethier came up with the idea of selling cashews after the food distribution company he was vice president of went bankrupt and he was left with several hundred cashew roasting machines. He and Haufe began providing the nuts to the Host International airport concession company at Logan. From there, the business expanded to supply the Marriott Hotel chain, and with it came nationwide distribution.

Today, Haufe says, the distribution is within New England. Customers include restaurants, bakeries, hotels, country clubs, schools and retailers. Showing a visitor around Arcade's 16,000-square-foot warehouse, Haufe observes that brother T.J. roasted cashews earlier in the day, with close to 2,000 pounds slated for immediate delivery.

Among other Arcade products are nut, trail and snack mixes. The ingredients? Butter toffee almonds, pistachios, hazel nuts, wasabi peanuts, Cajun devil peanuts, pignolia nuts and praline pecan halves. Also, sun-dried tomatoes, Australian and Thai ginger, coconut roll with almond, figs, kiwi and white chocolate cranberries. And that's not even getting to the confectionary offerings.

The Arcade product is international in origin.

"Our cashews are from Brazil and India," Haufe says, while standing amid stainless steel bagging and roasting machines. In adjacent rooms, stacks of boxed products with labels such as "cheddar ale mix" stretch roofward. "We have nuts from Turkey," he continues, "fruits from the Philippines and Thailand, nut meats from California."

Haufe says their business model involves selling in bulk to its customers, who "repackage it and



Stacks of snack mixes and nuts fill the retail store shelves at Arcade Snack Co. in Auburn.

put their name on it."

Anita Ethier, T.J.'s wife, is human resources/officer manager. "If a customer wants something, they're gonna bust their butt to get it," she says, referring to the family's executive staff. "If you don't get your product in time, then we're out of money, and they're out of money. Since day one, they've been driven."

From the Ethiers' basement, the business evolved to a commercial facility in West Acton, then into larger spaces in Hudson and Northboro. It arrived at the Auburn location in 2005. After opening the renovated Southbridge Street building, the unannounced appearance of foot traffic visitors, lured by the aroma of freshly roasted nuts, sparked the idea of opening an adjoining retail store.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 88



Mary Ann Simpson, left, has been a sales representative for 19 years at Arcade Snack Co. Pamela O'Coin manages the retail store.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 87

Haufe says the retail store draws customers who wait in their cars for its doors to open on weekends during the holidays. Displaying hand-dipped chocolate cashews, he proudly adds, "This is what my mother does. People come in to buy 15 boxes during the holidays."

Arcade also purchases Belgian chocolate to create its chocolate turtles adorned with images of the reptile, as well as bear claws. Tins, trays, gift boxes and bags are among the related offerings. Associated items include raisins, peanuts, cranberries, sesame chips, pretzels, crackers, dried fruits and myriad nut varieties, with many of the products dipped in malts, chocolate or yogurt.

Arcade's reputation hinges on flavor and standards, Haufe says. Specific growers and components are painstakingly selected for the snack and trail mixes. "It's all about taste and quality, not about price, because someone always

appreciates quality," he says.

Arcade has also come to possess a strong ideology. "How do you separate yourself? By doing something different," Haufe says. "Our customer service is second-to-none."

The passing of George Ethier was a major trauma for the clan. Haufe describes his relationship with the elder Ethier as marked by "a lot of energy and chutzpah." He admits, though, that starting out in the business at the age of 22, "I was young and I didn't know what I wanted to do."

In testimony to his mother's determination, he notes, "One reason we're still in the business is that failure was not an option."

Yet there were times when Haufe had second thoughts about the sometimes grueling demands of the business. Giving voice to his concerns, he recalls George Ethier asking, "What are you talking about? We can't stop, or we'll lose the house."

“It was 100 percent sweat equity,” added Anita Ethier. “They would work nights and weekends – well into the night.”

Like any business, Haufe says, “You’ve got to work hard to get ahead. You’ve got to give up a lot, too, like canceling vacations and trips. Sometimes you can’t go away weekends.”

Haufe is quick to praise the Arcade workforce of 22 employees, many of whom are featured prominently on the business’ website, including longtime warehouse manager Piotr Janczewski, originally from Poland.

“No one can get to where they are by themselves. You need great employees to help you onward,” he says, pointing to Janczewski’s expertise and describing him as “part of the family.”

That family approach carries pros and cons, yet ultimately the Arcade experience has yielded a unified management team.

“As far as not seeing eye-to-eye, I think they had that,” Anita Ethier recalls. “There was a learning curve, but I think we resolved it. We still like each other!” she says with a laugh.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 90

Blanched salted hazel nuts fill containers.

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Hand-made milk chocolate turtles cool before being packaged.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 89

As an example of family unity in the face of challenges, Anita Ethier cited a 1997 UPS drivers' strike that threatened to disrupt Arcade's delivery lines. Extended family members from outside the business were contacted in Maryland, and they pitched in to make deliveries, using their own vehicles.

"Were there arguments? Yes," she says of the family business history. "But each learned to respect one another's role. Different managers don't always see eye-to-eye. But the goal was to succeed and get the product out to the customer — no one will ever compromise on that."

"Mom was the referee," Haufe adds, referring to Ann Ethier, "because a lot of the time we did knock heads."

With the rise of nut allergens, federal food and drug regulations for businesses such as Arcade, a Safe Quality Food and Kosher-certified facility, have become more onerous.

"The regulations involved are crazy. We've been doing it without a problem, but the regulations are much more strict," Anita Ethier says.

Yet Haufe notes the nutritional value of nuts: "It's healthy, good fat. People bake with it, and it's used in smoothies."

Oh yeah, back to those Arcade confectionary offerings: Haribo, jelly bellies, koppers, marich chocolate, fruit jelly slices, licorice, gummies, jelly beans, Jordan almonds, butterflies, orange slices, Swedish fish, spearmint leaves, spice drops ... 

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