

There's no beef with price of peanut butter

By BETTY MASSON
Special writer

other ingredients to make a high-protein animal food. About 15 tons are accumulated each month.

NEXT COMES the squishy part, where the peanuts go into still another machine and come out as peanut butter. Different size discs are used to grind the peanuts into smooth or chunky peanut butter.

At this time, they are also mixed with salt, dextrose and a stabilizer, which helps keep the peanut butter from separating into oil and a blob.

The mixture is cooled before being bottled, and this also helps prevent separation. Another machine takes care of pouring the peanut butter into sterilized jars, and then they go into cartons.

Finally, the mixture is left undisturbed for 48 hours. Moving it around right away might make it separate.

Velvet caters to customers mostly in the Midwest, although it does send some peanut butter to the east coast. There are indications the rest of the world is getting interested in peanut butter, which was developed in the U.S. in 1890 by a St. Louis physician.

ALTMAN HAS had more inquiries than ever from potential customers in Japan, Egypt and Malaysia but has no plans for exporting.

North America still leads in the consumption of peanuts, which were first grown by the Incas in South America. Spanish conquistadors took them to Africa, and slaves brought them back to the Southern states. But peanuts did not become a popular food until the time of the Civil War.

Today, peanuts rank among the top six agricultural products of the U.S. Dr. George Washington Carver reportedly found 300 uses for peanuts, and scientists are working to find more.

And in spite of the White House connection with peanuts, National Peanut Week has been around for a long time, since 1941 to be exact. It became a month in 1973.

March is National Peanut Month, but for some 55 persons working in an aromatic atmosphere in Livonia, every month is peanut month.

They work in Velvet Food Products' plant on Schoolcraft to oversee the transformation of about a million pounds of peanuts each month into a million pounds of peanut butter.

Velvet is one of the largest independent manufacturers of peanut butter in the country.

They are meeting a demand that increases as the price of meat goes up. The price of peanut butter is also going up, notes general manager Gerald Altman, but even with a seven percent yearly increase, a peanut butter sandwich is still a lot less expensive than a steak or a hamburger.

With a glass of milk, it provides valuable protein. While peanuts do have calories, they do not have cholesterol.

VELVET SALESMEN, in cooperation with the National Peanut Council, are celebrating the month with special displays in food markets. The displays, recalling Dr. George Washington Carver, tell about new ways of using peanut butter.

You could try peanut butter and honey as a glaze for chicken, for instance. You could be shaving with a product made from peanuts or your house could be insulated with peanut butter.

And while you could make peanut butter in your own kitchen, it's less messy to purchase it at the grocery store.

IN THE VELVET plant, which is the only peanut butter plant in the Detroit area, everything is automated except the initial step, pouring the peanuts out of burlap bags and into the roaster.

The plant operates a four-day week for most years. About five years ago, Altman moved from two eight-hour shifts five days a week to two nine-hour shifts four days.

This leaves Fridays free for maintenance, repairs and cleaning. It is a scheme which works very well, says Altman. The plant has its own machine shop for repairs and for making special equipment.

A cold storage facility holds a month's supply of peanuts, which come mostly from Virginia and North Carolina. Peanuts also are grown in Georgia, Alabama, Texas, Florida, New Mexico, Mississippi and Oklahoma.

They arrive in Michigan already shelled except for a small percentage which Velvet bags and distributes for peanuts-in-the-shell consumption.

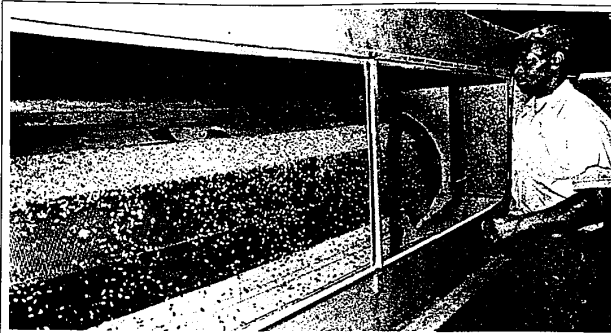
SOME 40 YEARS ago, Paul Zuckerman, founder of the company, first ground up peanuts by hand in a garage. Zuckerman is still active in the organization, which moved from Detroit to Livonia 15 years ago.

Velvet at the time was one of the first peanut butter plants in the country to introduce a new roaster, which cooks the peanuts 20 minutes at 350 degrees with hot air. This eliminates scorching and uneven roasting which occurred under the old flame method.

The roaster is capable of cooking 7,000 pounds an hour.

From this, a conveyor carries the peanuts to another machine where they are blanched. In this process, the skins are rubbed off and blown away.

But they are not wasted. Stored in a special room, they are shipped back to the south, where they are mixed with



Foreman Mose Franks inspects the nut roaster, which cooks 7,000 pounds of peanuts per hour in the Velvet plant. (Staff photo by Bob Woodring)

Urban migration focus of OU talk

Brian J. L. Berry, author, lecturer, and urban planning expert from Harvard University, will talk about the consequences of urban migration and other problems, in lectures March 29 and 30 at Oakland University in the Gold Room of the Oakland Center.

Berry will speak at 10 a.m. March 29 on "Environmental Consequences of the Post 1970 Migration Reversals" and at noon March 30 on "The Changing Urban Environment."

The speaker is professor of sociology and chairman of the Ph.D. program in urban planning at Harvard.

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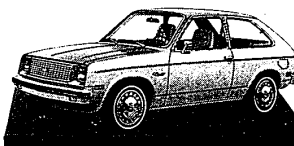
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