

Sweet deal for local candy maker

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Marshall Field's may be gone from Chicago, but the department store's popular Frango Mints are moving back in.

Cupid Candies, a family-owned business on the city's Southwest Side, has been awarded a contract to produce Frangos at their manufacturing facility at 7637 S. Western Ave.

The popular candies, developed in 1927 for a Seattle department store, became a Marshall Field's staple after the company bought the Seattle stores two years later and moved production to Chicago.

For 70 years, the mints were produced on the 13th floor of the department store's State Street location. But in 1999, production was moved to Dunmore, Pa.-based Gertrude Hawk Chocolates.

The candies were a hit. But the distant location struck a sour note in Chicago.

When Macy's took over the Marshall Field's stores in 2005, the company began looking for a local producer. Cupid Candies landed the job after submitting a series of samples.

"There are two reasons we brought Frango's back to Chicago," said Ralph Hughes, a Macy's regional vice president. "First we made a commitment to the city, and second, the production of the candy was too much for one company to produce alone."

Gertrude Hawk Chocolates will continue to produce the candy as well, though Macy's officials will not say how much.

According to Cupid Candies' president John Stefanos, he is not allowed to discuss sales or production figures associated with the contract.

Started by his father Paul Stefanos in 1936, Cupid Candies began as one candy factory on 79th and Ashland, supplying a line of candy and popcorn products to retail stores.

Paul Stefanos passed away in 2000. The business now has four manufacturing facilities in the Chicago area and a list of retail customers that includes Crate & Barrel, Figi's Inc of Marshfield, Wisc., Golden Farm Candies of South Bend, Ind. and Terry Lynn, Inc., in Elgin, Ill.

The company also supplies dozens of gift shops, floral shops and gift basket companies throughout the Midwest.

The precise popularity of the Frango's mint is apparently a trade secret. Macy's spokeswoman Jennifer

McNamara refused to provide sales figures, saying only that mint was the "number one flavor of Frango Chocolates."

According to Stefanos, the company had to submit samples and prove that they could reproduce the closely-guarded recipe.

"When they (Federated) announced that they were looking for a Chicago manufacturer we submitted samples and they narrowed it down to five or six companies and then they asked us to submit more samples. We got close enough to the piece that they felt that we could produce the actual product."

At Gertrude Hawk Chocolates, the candy is made on an enrolling line, where the center piece is molded and "enrolled" or coated in chocolate.

Stefanos plans to use a different process, known as "cold slabbing" to make the candies. Instead of purchasing an enrolling machine they will cut the candies at the center and coat it in chocolate.

Frango Mints is a coveted contract for this modest manufacturing company. But Stefanos says he can't say how much Cupid Candies is contracted to produce or how much the deal is worth.

"I haven't told anybody," he said. "It's a situation where they don't want to release that information for whatever reason."

Stefanos would also not disclose his start-up costs for the new venture.

He estimates that the contract will make up 20 to 25 percent of Cupid Candies' production and require the company to beef up its 18-person workforce.

"I will definitely have to add a second shift," states Stefanos.

"Obviously this will be the biggest contract that we've got. We started out as a retail company when my dad started this company and I choose to go another route. We are still are in the retail business, but I've chosen to try and expand on the wholesale level."