



Baseball Nut

Roasted peanuts and Major League Baseball keep a family, and a family business, going strong.

By Chris Gigley

PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER TAYLOR

Dallas Barnes is willing to drive hundreds of miles to see a ballgame. During a trip with his family to New Mexico, Barnes packed everyone in the car and drove more than 500 miles north to Denver and Coors Field for a Colorado Rockies game.

As Barnes and his family settled into their seats at the ballpark, he heard the classic refrain common in ballparks across America since the turn of the 20th century.

“Peanuts!”

Barnes signaled for a bag, passed his money down the aisle, and caught an arcing toss by the vendor from about 30 feet away. He looked at the bag and smiled. The package of Hampton Farms peanuts offered a taste of home, roasted and salted in his company’s plant in tiny Severn, just northwest of Murfreesboro in the heart of peanut-growing country. Hampton Farms is an official licensee of Major League Baseball.

That licensing deal doesn’t guarantee its peanuts are sold at every Major League park, but they are sold at more than half of them, Coors Field included.

“I have sons who play baseball and I follow baseball religiously,” he says. “Any trip we’re on, we try to work in a game at a Major League park.”

Of course, Barnes will also try to talk a little business.

“We’ll call the concessions manager and see if we can get in to visit with him, too,” he says.

Like a young ballplayer trying to make it to the big leagues, Barnes admits that being involved with baseball can be a struggle. Teams are high-maintenance customers, which is why Rick McGee, Barnes’s cousin and fellow baseball fanatic, is in charge of handling baseball teams during the summer months. McGee looks at his clients’ schedules. If he hasn’t heard from concessions managers when they have a long stretch of home games coming up, McGee will call them.

“Concessions managers have a lot on their minds,” says Barnes. “They’re worried about cups and napkins and hot dogs and beer and all the other things they have to keep up with. If the peanut guy is looking out for them, it makes their lives that much easier. We’ll jump through hoops to get them whatever they need.”

Extreme examples have included overnight shipping cases to the West Coast.

“We’ve even grabbed a pickup before, threw a few cases in the back, and drove a couple hundred miles to get them there,” says Barnes, who knows from personal experience that he can make it from the company’s New Mexico plant to Houston’s



The Severn Peanut Company sits right in the middle of the town of Severn; in fact, the post office is surrounded by the company's processing plants (above, left). At one of the plants, Earl Monger loads cases of peanut butter onto an assembly line (above, right).

The scene in Severn

Drivers on U.S. Highway 158 begin to see them just past Roanoke Rapids. Fields and fields of homely little plants, most green and a few parched brown by the sun. All the beauty is beneath the ground, where the roots are laden with plump pods of Virginia peanuts.

Virginias are one of four types of peanuts grown in the United States and are the primary type grown in the Carolinas and Virginia. Virginia peanuts have the largest kernels of the four and account for most of the peanuts roasted and eaten as in-shells. They account for about 15 percent of total U.S. production and the bulk of the peanuts Severn Peanut Company uses.

Barnes says the company also dabbles in Spanish peanuts, which have smaller kernels covered with a reddish-brown skin, and Valencias, which have a sweeter flavor and are usually roasted and sold in the shell. The only type he doesn't use are Runners, the dominant peanut type grown in the United States, accounting for 80 percent of total U.S. production.

Many of the Virginias grown along U.S. Highway 158 end up at the plant in Severn.

There isn't much to the town. Its post office is a tiny little block of a building, nearly swallowed whole by the Severn Peanut Company complex. Behind is the huge processing plant, where the company handles tens of thousands of tons of nuts a year. The company's executive offices are across the street, where Barnes

works the phones nonstop to keep his grandfather's legacy alive.

George Dallas Barnes was patriarch of one of three families that formed Severn Peanut Company in 1946. He owned a general mercantile store and happened to have a small peanut sheller he used to custom shell seeds for local peanut growers. He saw the chance to do more with that sheller.

George Dallas Barnes's son returned from World War II and approached the Britts and Watsons, two local farming families involved in the cotton gin business, about joining them in an edible nut-shelling operation. They did, starting the tradition that carries on today. Dallas came on in 1978 after graduating from North Carolina State University with a degree in agronomy. He didn't intend to become a third-generation owner of the family business, however.

"I didn't know what I wanted to do," he says. "But my father told me he was almost ready to retire, and if I wanted to come back to work there, fine. If not, he said he would start looking into selling the company. I thought, unless I give it a shot, I'll never know. I think it's worked out OK for me."

In 1978, the company sold seed and raw peanuts primarily to candy companies, peanut butter companies, and other businesses across the country. In 1987, Barnes expanded into the in-shell processing business and oversaw construction of its current

“We tried a jalapeño variety and called it ‘Jalapeanut,’ but we had to drop it — all we got was heat.”

plant in 1988. Right around 2000, the company expanded into granulated peanuts and peanut butter. Finally, in 2003, it acquired Edenton-based Jimbo’s Jumbos, a large competitor in the in-shell business, and a company with oil-roasting and peanut butter production capabilities. Jimbo’s Jumbos still operates today, supplying the wholesale trade with large containers of peanut butter.

Pushing the limits of peanuts

Severn Peanut Company now has four production facilities, including plants in Springfield, Massachusetts, and Portales, New Mexico, where it roasts and packages peanuts and peanut products. The Hampton Farms line has grown dramatically from just in-the-shell nuts to oil-fried, peanut butter, and

shelled varieties. Still, Barnes says there’s plenty more the company can do with the humble peanut.

“We’re working on different flavors to put on cocktail nuts,” says Barnes. “Obviously, we can do honey roast, but there are also chili-lemon-type flavors, barbecue, hickory smoke, and other funky flavors. The peanut is like a potato chip. There are a lot of options.”

The company has also worked on flavoring in-shell nuts. It already sells a hot and spicy Cajun flavor. Barnes says the nuts steep in a tea of spicy liquid, then are vacuumed, air-dried, and roasted. Cracks along the seams of the shells let the liquid seep inside to the nuts. By the time they’re ready to eat, the papery skin is all flavor.

“We tried a jalapeño variety and called it



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'Jalapeanut,' but we had to drop it," says Barnes, ruefully. "Great name, but all we got was heat, and we wanted a little more Southwest-type flavor with it. We haven't perfected it yet."

In the meantime, the company is buying from an expanded growing area, a result of the U.S. government relaxing farming quotas in the early 2000s. Non-traditional growing areas such as South Carolina and the former tobacco-growing counties in North Carolina are now growing enough peanuts to force down the acreage devoted to the crop in traditional regions. Barnes sees it as a positive development.

"We're buying from places that are new to peanut production in the last four to five years," says Barnes. "The geography is broader, and from a weather-risk standpoint, it's better than having a really localized area in northeastern North Carolina and southeastern Virginia."

Barnes admits he could move the company anywhere if he really wanted to. He'd just rather not. "Northampton County is a great, rural county, and it's great to be able to offer some good jobs here," he says. "We want to be here because our roots are here. I grew

up here. My mom still lives here. My sister is here."

And Severn Peanut Company will be here as long as Barnes has anything to say about it. Four of his kids spent their summers working at the plant, keeping the family ties alive. Additionally, McGee's son, Blake, works for Hampton Farms as a salesman, while Barnes' sister, Paige Pinnix, works in accounting for Severn Peanut Company. Also, the original Watson family's grandson, R.P. Watson III, is vice president of operations.

"I suspect that some of our kids will come into the business, but they just need to go do what they like to do," says Barnes, who sounds a lot like his father back in 1978. "If they come to work here, great. If they don't, they should do what they love."

Whatever they choose to do, the Severn Peanut Company will be there in Severn, sending its peanuts to ballparks across the country from March until October. 🐘

Chris Gigley is a Greensboro-based freelance writer who has enjoyed Hampton Farms peanuts in at least 30 different Major and Minor League ballparks.



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