

# Snack Heaven: 150 Varieties of Picard's Local Products



John Picard in front of one of the eight exclusive stores.



John and his sister René with some of their 150 products.



Founder Jim Picard and his three-year-old Shepherd-mix constant companion Speedy II.

Text & photographs by Chris Mills

John Picard comes from fine Irish stock, with a dash of Dutch and Sommes French for the namesake. He could be a linebacker or a mountain man, although he could also be an international diplomat, which is what he'd considered when he studied economics at The University of Western Ontario, in London.



The combine and hopper collect the dug-up peanut plants.



Digging up the plants during harvesting.



Gathering the exposed peanut clusters.



Transferring cleaned peanuts.

Instead, he creates confectionery of unspeakable palatability and delectable taste for the family's business, Picard's Peanuts, out of Waterford, Ontario. Distributed through eight exclusive stores throughout southern Ontario, the products come from his father's peanut farm and his own Picard's Food processing operation.

It's a long way from the lone tobacco farmer who replanted his fields in corn and beans before re-planting it all for Valencia peanuts more than three decades ago.

### Peanut Farmer and Founder

That's when father Jim Picard, 72, founder, farm operator and owner of the stores that bear his name rolled the dice. So why peanuts?

"Stupidity," says Jim with a laugh. "We asked all the right questions." He sits in his van with Speedy II, his three-year-old German shepherd mixed breed, as he watches the combines collect the season's final harvest in October.

## 150 Varieties of Picard's Local Products

"Is the climate conducive to peanuts? They said yes. Is the soil right for peanuts? They said yes. How much can we get per acre? They said 2,000 pounds. What they didn't tell us is that that figure isn't necessarily consistent. Only after we lost a significant portion of the harvest to frost did we ask them why they hadn't told us about that. They said, 'Because it didn't correlate.'"

He laughs and shakes his head at the years spent struggling as yields declined, prices for peanuts dropped, and interest rates skyrocketed. In order to survive, he opened the Windham store in 1980 where much of the stock sold as bird food.

building on the main drag in Waterford, wearing clean denims and the most chocolate-covered smock in town.

"As you can see, I'm a hands-on kind of guy," he says by way of introduction. "I have to be here constantly because chocolate is very unforgiving. If something breaks down, it solidifies pretty quickly, so I have to be on top of it constantly. I go through about a dozen (of these smocks) a day."

John, now 48, and the father of three, graduated just in time for the killing frost of 1983.

"Following the first few years of horticultural mayhem," he says without rancour, "it took us from 1979 to 1991 to realize we had to

found we were at the bottom of the line whereby we couldn't get reliable service. So in 1992, we learned to depend on ourselves."

John incorporated Picard's Foods and moved into 5,000 square feet of local warehouse. Machinery they needed didn't exist, so John took whatever the market offered and modified it to his needs. In fact, just about every piece of equipment for their confectionery processing has been personally manufactured or modified.

They now employ 12 to 15 local residents in a 22,000 square foot facility. That's in addition to cash register operators and gift basket assemblers in the stores, plus the seasonal workers on the

pounds a day. From here we move on to dry roasted almonds, which are brought in special with a touch darker roast for more flavour. By then it's mid-October and gift preparation and assembly begins. We spray our Ontario peanuts and then move on to specialty applications like chocolate-covered chipnuts, blueberries and coffee beans for added assortment. Mid-October means it's time to start running the moulding plant which produces our Caramel Barns, chocolate fudge buttercreams and Swiss style truffles. In early November we produce fresh caramel pecan clusters for our daily production. This takes us into mid-December. In total we produce over 50,000 gift boxes and



John rolls out a cart of roasted peanuts.



Shannon prepares chocolate treats for packaging.



Marion operates the chocolate-coating machinery.



John with chocolate bark.

### The Next Generation

Meanwhile, teenaged John began university to escape the farm-life cycle. Only after four years of business and economics did he encounter a different calling, that of the family business that needed him.

Today John strides into the office of a flat-roofed non-descript

get into the value-added side of the business in order to survive. We just had to slug it out with no inventory, high debt and no sales. That's when we realized we had to begin creating unique products other than just peanuts. In the beginning, we hauled our peanuts into Toronto for processing, but

farm where Jim cultivates 100 acres in rotation on 225 acres of Ontario's finest fox-coarse sands.

### 150 Varieties

"Following Labour Day," says John, "we begin to spray milk chocolate. First up is our raisin run where we are able to spray at a thousand

several thousand wicker gift items."

The handful of products originally sold through the Windham store 18 years ago has now grown to more than 150 varieties.

It's an Ontario, if not a Canadian, success story since very few companies take a product that involves seeding, cultivating, har-

vesting, processing, manufacturing, packaging, distribution, marketing and retail.

"People think we're a big company," says Jim, who pioneered the first commercial shelling plant in Canada behind the store, "but we're just a small family business that works hard."

John concurs. Only about 60,000 pounds of almost a million pounds of peanuts produced are shelled and graded. The rest go through their processing plant, along with some imported specialties like extra large cashews, mammoth pecans, and Extra Fancy Virginia and Spanish nuts for variety.

In fact, the variety is almost mind-boggling. Consider 15 types of peanut brittle; add chocolate variations and plain, honeyed or praline. But that doesn't include varieties of Swiss, dark or white chocolate, non-sugar added, beer nuts, chipnuts, redskins, honey nuggets, pecan clusters, and caramel twists.

Mix in 15 varieties of flavoured nuts like dill and Cajun, chili and hot habanero. Every year, John adds about six new products and drops a few that don't work.

"You can never sit on what you have," he says. "You're always trying to improve and that takes a lot of hard work. I always bite off more than I can chew, but you come to accept that it may be three, four years before something works. The creative processes are my passion. I love to create a new product or machine. It may be my failing (to do it myself), but if I abandoned that aspect of myself, it'd be a loss to the business."

And for the Picard family these days, business is just nuts. Oh, sorry.

*Chris Mills is a writer/photographer whose article wasn't influenced by sugar-free Swiss-chocolate covered pecans and praline clusters whatsoever. He shares his life with his wife, son, two dogs and a bunny in Fort Erie.*

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