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Photos by J. Kat Woronowicz/For the North County Times

Jerry Swain, below, is the owner and originator of Jer's Handmade Chocolate Confections, a Solana Beach-based company. Jer's Handmade Chocolate Confections include peanut butter-based fillings in different varieties, covered by milk, dark, or white chocolate.

Candy Man: Solana Beach resident makes a sweet living

By: AGNES DIGGS - Staff Writer

Jerry Swain doesn't exactly look like an empire builder. Maybe it's his boyish looks or his friendly smile.

But make no mistake about it ---- the Solana Beach resident gave up a promising corporate career to turn a hobby and a 16-year-old family recipe into a money-making enterprise.

He called his venture, launched in 2000, Swain Creations. His first product was called "Jer's IncrediBalls." Now the handmade confections come in three flavors: the Original IncrediBall, Pretzo Change-O and Cara Mella that run neck-and-neck in popularity with customers.

They're all handmade in the same process he used when he made them in his house, Swain said. "We make everything in small batches, we use premium ingredients and we use humans to taste-test," he said.

With Valentine's Day just around the corner, they'd be a sweetheart of a gift. Why?

"Because they're special, just like a person's sweetheart," Swain said. "They're unique inside and outside, they don't come from a mold, they're not perfect ---- they're special, and our chocolates are as well."

And Swain's not the only one who says so. For three years running, beginning in 2001, his candies were named "Best in Show" by his peers at the annual Retail Confectioners International Chocolate Conference, which draws several hundred attendees. In addition, the Original IncrediBall won the Silver Bowl Award for "Best First Time Confection" in 2001. Pretzo Change-O won "Best New Piece" in 2002.

Swain, 39, and his delectable creations have been featured on radio, three television networks and more recently on the Food Network.

The candy venture started with 14 proposed flavors and, through focus groups and taste-testing, was narrowed to three tried-and-true flavors. He is planning to launch one or two more this year, he said. Odds are, they will include peanut butter. It has become a great asset, he said. The centers of all his candies all have a peanut butter base.

And why not? About 80 percent of the candies at the checkout stands have peanuts and peanut butter, Swain said. "But ours is better ---- it's all natural," he said.

The Original adds a rice crisp to the center for a slight crunch and is identifiable by parallel lines striped on the outside. Pretzo Change-O adds crunchy baked pretzel bits and is marked by a crisscross pattern. And the Cara Mella joins peanut butter with caramel, with an x-mark on top to distinguish it from the others. The centers are hand scooped, covered in cocoa-butter-based milk, dark or white chocolate and hand-boxed, including a card with one of 36 motivational quotes.

"It's just a happy product," Swain said. "It's great to go day-to-day knowing you're doing something to make people feel good."

The candies are available in several local stores, through telephone order and by e-mail. He has no retail outlet and the factory where the goodies are now made is in Los Angeles, employing up to 30 people, depending on the season.

Some customers buy his product for special occasions while others bring repeat business, buying for their own consumption.

So how does a guy with a business degree from UC Riverside, a solid corporate career, and a marriage to an architect from Argentina named Mariella become a chocolatier?

It started in his parents' kitchen in 1986. Swain was still in college. While experimenting with a recipe for peanut butter balls, he came up with his unique combination of natural peanut butter and chocolate, hand-rolling the "balls." They soon became his traditional contribution to get-togethers with family, friends and fraternity brothers. In 1989, just for fun, Swain entered the candies in the Riverside County Date Festival and won first place. That's when he began to feel he might be on to something.

After graduation, for the next nine years, he gave an annual party for friends, which grew to include a couple of hundred people. The parties evolved into a candy-sampling fundraiser called "Jer's Ball." The entry fee included one can of food, allowing him to donate thousands of pounds of canned goods to local food banks. He later expanded the philanthropic side of his venture to include other nonprofits, such as the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and the Susan G. Komen Breast Cancer Foundation.

Swain said he was inspired by his dad's advice not to wait too long or sell himself short in giving rein to his entrepreneurial side. "This (the candy business) was the craziest thing I could think of," he said. "It's the thing I was passionate about."

The next question might be, what does he get out of it?

"This is the first business I've been in that you can see the direct effect ---- making people happy," he said. "It makes a great difference."

Swain's heroes are Walt Disney and Martin Luther King Jr. because they both had dreams that they pursued to a reality that others couldn't even visualize. Pictures of both men are prominently displayed in his home, he said.

"We have a business that started as a dream, and we have people that came into it that want to be part of that dream," he said.

For information or to order, call (800) 540-7265 or visit the Web site at www.iwantchocolate.com.

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