

Sorbet maker adds flavour to Jamaican market

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DESPITE the harsh economic times entrepreneurs continue to invest in Jamaica with one of the newest entrants being a company out of Montego Bay, St James which opened its doors last December under the name DeJaFrut All Natural Sorbet.

The sorbet company, which has been test-marketing the product in the United States since last year, said it opted to begin production here in Jamaica ahead of completing the regulatory work in the US for sale of the product in that market starting this fall.

The family-owned-and-operated company, which currently has its sorbet in three major hotels and several beach bars in Montego Bay, will soon be spreading its distribution chain to other hotels in Negril and Ocho Rios as well as selected supermarkets across the island.

The Wilson sisters, who are of Jamaican parentage, said they have spent the last year-and-a-half perfecting the product before bringing it to Jamaica.

Marie, who is the chief financial officer of DeJaFrut, said the idea to manufacture the product was birthed one day as she and her twin sister, Maria, sat eating an icee at a salon in their hometown of Bronx, New York.

"In the summer, icee is a big thing in the Bronx. And so my sister, who had just come back from Jamaica, where she was studying law, said this would be a good thing for the kids there," she recalled.

However, Marie said when they discovered that icees were made with only syrup and water; they decided that would not do as they needed a product that was not only delicious but also nutritious.

Having no experience in the food industry, the sisters pulled on their brother Christopher's chemistry background to develop a product which would maintain a six-month shelf life, without additives or preservatives.

"The aim was to have an ingredients list that is stable but tastes good," Christopher said of the product which is said to contain no artificial flavours, colourings or preservatives.

They first started off with mango coconut, pineapple and sorrel flavours, and relied on family and friends for their feedback.

Even as they test the product in the United States, the siblings decided to make their foray into the Jamaican market at last year's staging of the entertainment event, Reggae Sumfest.

"We got a lot of good feedback then, but we realised that the product does best during the daytime instead of at a night event," Marie said.

Armed with that information, the siblings said they needed packaging for the sorbet, which would allow for adults and children alike to be able to grab the product on the go.

That, Marie said, was how the idea was born to put it in a push-up package, resembling a paper tube.

As soon as the product was ready for sale, the siblings came to Jamaica and set up business in Coral Gardens in St James.

But Marie said sourcing the quality produce needed for the sorbet was the most challenging aspect. However, with the help of the Canadian arm of JAMPRO, Marie said she was directed to the Rural Agricultural Development Authority which helped them to make connection with the current suppliers.

For now the company sources pineapple from a small farmer in Ginger Hill, St Elizabeth and mangoes from another farmer also in that parish. This is, in turn, is taken to a processor to be made into purée.

Marie said the company still has to import coconut cream as they have not yet been able to find a consistent supplier of this product.

"There is an abundance of coconut water but that is not what we need. We need the coconut cream and that is what we are having a problem getting," she explained.

DeJaFrut currently produces six flavours, namely coconut, sorrel, key lime, mango, pineapple and black cherry. A coffee flavour is currently being tested.

Christopher said the company provides the DeJaFrut-branded freezers free of charge to distributors who only pay for the product.

The Wilsons, who were participating in the Jamaica Product Exchange (JAPEX) tourism trade show which was held at the Montego Bay Convention Centre in St James, said they are working at getting their product into most major hotels in the island.

Filling the orders for larger hotels, Christopher said, would not be a problem as the plant can currently produce 10,000 4oz packs of the DeJaFrut sorbet per week, without working around the clock.

"We bring in about three to five staff every other week for production and we can do much more," Christopher said.

In the meantime, the Wilsons said they will be producing a pint-size container of the sorbet for the local market.

"We hope to introduce it to the local market by September, as we are now in discussions with a supermarket chain," he said.

The siblings say they are looking to fulfill the needs of the Jamaican market with a high-quality product, even while zeroing in on the hospitality sector.