

Spotlight on local businesses

Carib Pasta—making oodles of noodles



Jean and Roderique Mendes hard at work

IN 1993, JEAN AND RODERIQUE MENDES were searching for a good family business idea. Roderique was already a successful soft drink bottler, but, as Jean expressed during an interview with ONE CARIBBEAN, "We wanted to do something on our own." The Mendes family, offering to sell his industrial-quality pasta-making machinery. "Pasta is a good thing," the Mendes agreed, so after a thorough feasibility study, the business Carib Pasta was born. Formerly located in Corinth, today the company is located right in Union, also the birthplace of Jean Mendes.

Before Carib Pasta began local production of their six popular pasta varieties, St Lucia was importing over \$900,000.00 worth of pasta every year. That meant St Lucians were consuming huge amounts of pasta, in soups, one-pot dishes, and the traditional favorite, macaroni and cheese.

The Mendes family set to work

with 9 employees. During interviews, Jean and Roderique looked for applicants with a sound education, good reading and writing skills, and a solid knowledge of weights and measures. Today, Carib Pasta employs 15—including all of the original nine—to their company. "We subsidize transport because we're off the main roads, and it can be a little difficult to get here," Roderique Mendes explained. This seems a commendable policy more employers would do well to emulate.

Consistent high quality

Initially competition with the importers was fierce, particularly Trinidadian suppliers. Pasta from Canada and America also showed strong sales. "It was a real struggle," Jean Mendes recalls, "but somehow we managed to stay afloat." A significant factor in their steady profits was undoubtedly the consistently high quality of their

product, which is made from 100 per cent durum flour, a superior pasta flour used by Italian chefs for generations.

Several varieties of Carib pasta also use locally produced tomato paste, as well as dried spinach powder. This is how the lovely red and green hues of the corkscrews are created.

The production facility is well organized, and the sweet scent of wheat drifts over the drying racks and bagging shelves, emanating from the 100-pound bags of flour that set the entire process in motion. Carib Pasta uses 30 bags of flour a day, operating non-stop 45 hours per week.

How pasta is made

First flour and water are mixed by the heavy-duty equipment to form the dough. The dough is then extruded into the varied shapes that you see on store shelves: straight spaghetti, shells, twists,

the finished pasta is then weighed and bagged by hand, to ensure top quality control, and finally boxed and stacked, ready for distribution to every wholesaler on the island.

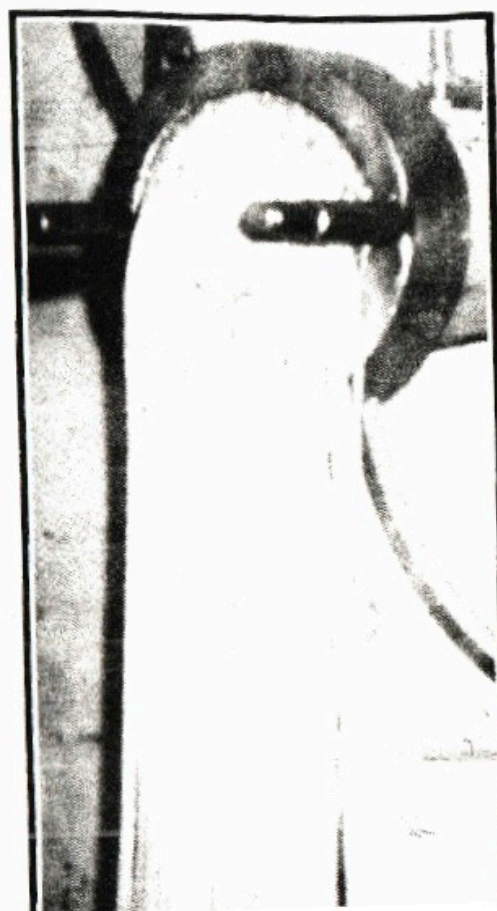
The Mendes family believe in supporting their wholesaling partners instead of undercutting them by going straight to retail—a great example of local business helping local business survive. Carib Pasta averages at least five deliveries a day, throughout St Lucia, to about a dozen wholesalers, who supply all the stores.

Government support

In 1994 the government realized it needed to take more active steps to support local industry, and instituted Article 56 to require an import license on pasta. This was a milestone for Carib Pasta, and a true vote of confidence. "After that," Jean Mendes said, "it was smooth sailing." The imported pastas are still on the shelves, but at least the playing field has been evened somewhat.

Just recently the Mendes family began to branch out with exports to OECS islands, from Grenada to St Kitts. Currently exports account for 25 per cent of the business, and there is great potential for growth.

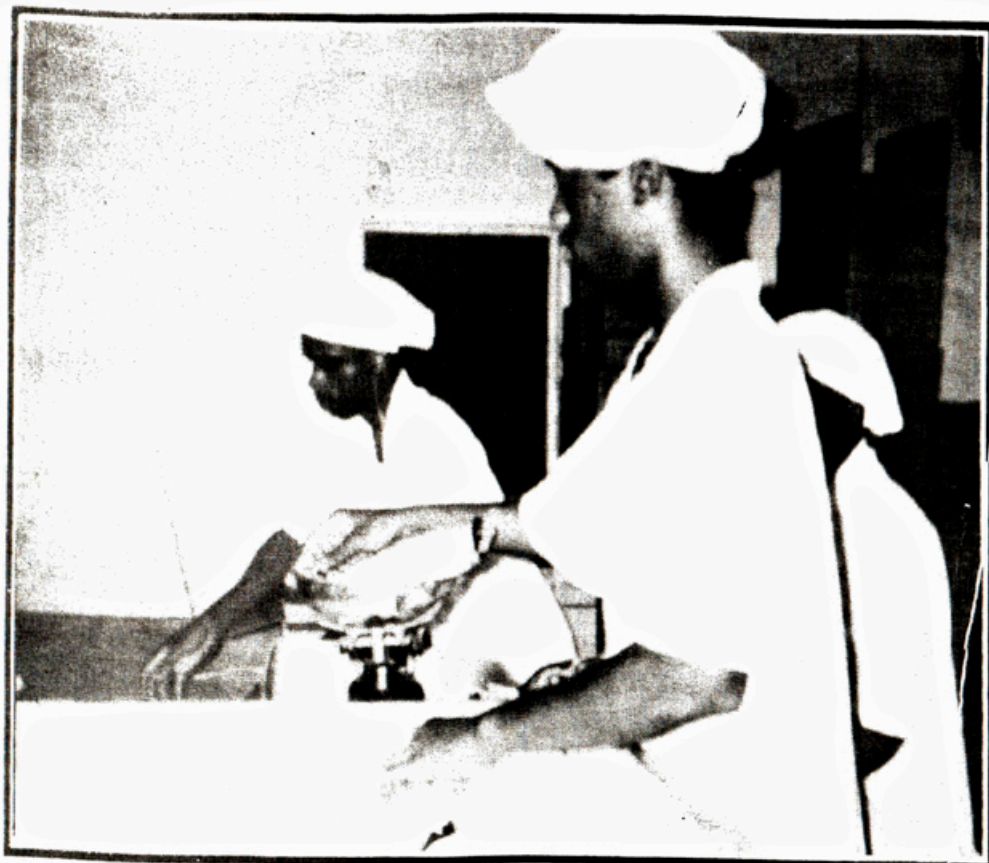
The most satisfying part of the business is enthusiastic feedback from customers. Last year Carib Pasta participated in this country's small business exhibition, and their taste-testing booth was very popular with the crowds. A chef cooked up a variety of tasty pasta dishes, and the crowd "loved it," Jean



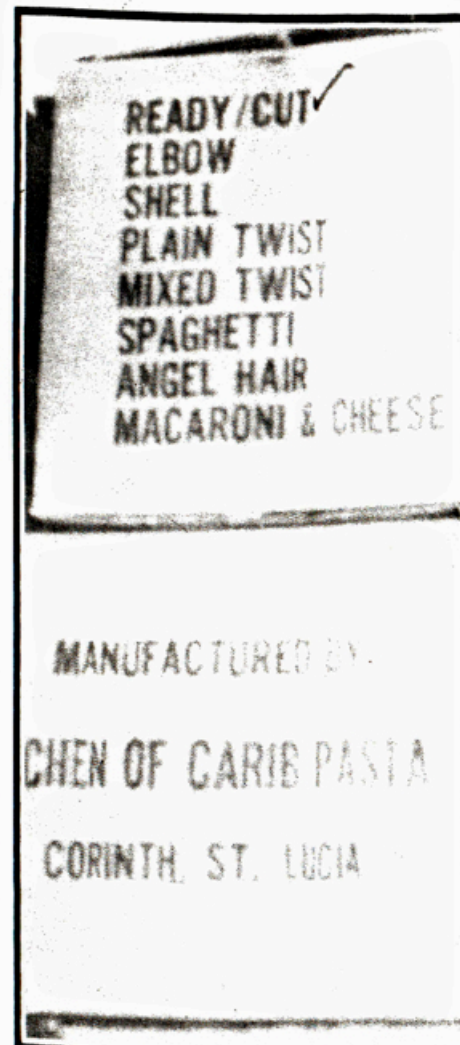
This is what spaghetti looks like before it's cut up

Mendes remembers with a pleased smile. They repeatedly asked for more recipes using all six varieties. (This sounds like a ripe opportunity for a good St Lucian cook out there to put out a successful pasta cookbook!)

So the next time you're seeking a quick, satisfying, nutritious meal, you can seek out Carib Pasta at your market, and take pride in supporting a valuable local business.



Employees hand-weigh and bag the product



Finished pasta ready for shipment