



GREG BASTIN

MJ Sparks, left, is the national retail sales manager for Ellison Bakery's new retail cookie line. Todd Wallin, seated, is the company's vice president and general manager.

Ellison to launch own cookie brand

New products to be in stores in about a month

BY LINDA LIPP

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For nearly 60 years, cookie lovers everywhere were familiar with the treats made by Fort Wayne's Ellison Bakery, even though they probably didn't know the company's name.

That's all about to change. By the end of April, grocery stores will be selling Ellison's new line of premium cookies for the first time under Ellison's own name.

Don Ellis and his father founded the bakery in 1945 — crunching its name from Ellis and son — and purchased the license that allowed it to begin developing and baking cookies for Archway in 1950. Although it sold back the license to Archway in 1997, Ellison continued to make the treats under an agreement that prohibited it from making cookies retailed under any other name, said Todd Wallin,

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Frayland Camacho looks over rows of cookies, which will be used to make ice-cream sandwiches, as they head into the oven.

ELLISON: Business is up 25% this year

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vice president and general manager at Ellison.

But Archway's sales declined over the years. The Michigan-based company finally filed bankruptcy last October and quickly sold off its assets. All Archway manufacturing ceased and the once-popular cookies quickly disappeared from store shelves.

By then, the Archway baking had dwindled to about 15 percent of the business at Ellison, which also makes cookies sold in bulk to ice-cream and confectionary manufacturers and in individual packages for schools, hospitals and nursing homes. Ellison was able to absorb the hit without laying off any of its 75 employees, Wallin said.

In fact, despite the fading Archway business, "we were up 38 percent last year and we're up 25 percent so far this year," Wallin said.

The company saw a new opportunity to grow by creating its own line of products after Archway's buyer indicated no interest in continuing that brand, Wallin said.

But rather than just make cookies based on the old Archway recipes, "We started from scratch. We're coming out with a new premium line," Wallin said.

Thus far, Ellison's research-and-development department has created nine new recipes for the cookie line. Three more are in the works, said MJ Sparks, who was brought in as national retail sales manager to market the new line.

The new cookies are targeted more at adults than children. The typical buyer is expected to be a woman, about age 35, who purchases them for herself and a small house-

hold, Sparks said.

Although the market is about the same as that for Pepperidge Farm's premium cookies, "We're creating a better cookie for less money," Sparks said.

Additional new products are expected to follow.

"We have in our plans to do some that are kid-related, but we're probably a year from that," Sparks said.

The company, which also produces the cookies given away to travelers passing through the Fort Wayne International Airport, tests its products on its workers and their family members, among others.

"We always do taste panels around the office and get feedback from our employees," Wallin said.

But it's also important to get comments from outsiders, through focus groups and other methods, added Wallin, who has worked at Ellison for 27 years.

"We've got a lot of years and experience in the business, but we're selling to people who don't, so we want their feedback," he said.

The first phase of the introduction of the new cookies is to get them in the aisles of grocery stores, in the middle of the premium cookie section. That's about a month away, and in-store tastings and other promotions will follow, Sparks said.

The family-owned bakery, headed by President Rob Ellis, completed a \$3.9-million expansion in 2008 that added to its warehouse area, allowing it to move packaging equipment into existing space. That also gives it room to grow as the new cookie line takes off. Eventually, a third oven and production line could be added, creating another 15 jobs, Wallin said.