

Chelsea's 'Jiffy' mixes have been making cooks happy for 65 years

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Chelsea -- Roll into town on Main Street, through three traffic lights, past actor Jeff Daniel's Purple Rose Theatre and down a hill. Suddenly the massive, white, 90-foot grain silos loom large over the landscape, emblazoned with a word as entrenched in Americana as apple pie: "Jiffy."

"Jiffy" is the pride of this charming little Victorian-era village west of Ann Arbor, instantly recognized symbol of Chelsea Milling Co., which has been producing its all-purpose baking mix for 65 years in a most low-key fashion.

In July, for example, with absolutely no fanfare, the 94-year old company introduced its first new product in nine years: "Jiffy" raspberry muffin mix.

In fact, since the spring of 1930, when housewife Mabel Holmes began marketing her invention for no-brainer biscuits, pancakes and baked goods, Chelsea Milling never has issued a coupon, written a single line of advertising copy or embarked on any new-product campaigns for its line of "Jiffy" products.

Yet every day, on miles of vintage-'50s mechanical conveyor belts, 1.4 million boxes of "Jiffy" muffin, cake, brownie, frosting, pizza dough and all-purpose baking mixes roll out the door. Without incentives, gimmicks or slogans, demand for these



Good ol' days - in a box

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mixes - 19 in all - is phenomenally high.

"None of our products, if you look at a per-category basis, are worse than third place (in sales)," says Howdy Holmes, Mabel's grandson and the third-generation president of the family-owned business. The corn muffin mix, introduced in 1950, has been among the country's top-selling dry goods for the past 20 years; the original baking mix ranks No. 2 in sales behind Bisquick, the leader.

The reason? Easy, says Holmes: "Eighteen of our 19 items retail for less than the price of a candy bar." Indeed, the diminutive, white boxes with the blue lettering are stamped with prices as nostalgic as their 1950s-inspired photography - 27 cents on up to 45 cents for the 6 1/2- to 9- ounce packages.

"Our motto is 'Quality and value since 1930,' and it obviously means something to lots and lots

of people," says the 47-year-old Holmes. "Our whole idea is to give value, and we think that means the highest quality ingredients and the best price. So that's our niche - that's who we are."

Nine generations

Framed by a large picture window in his office that looks out into "Jiffyville," as the grounds and buildings surrounding the company are called, Holmes talks about his life as a ninth-generation flour miller; the 20 years he spent in motor sports as a race-car driver, instructor, marketer and magazine correspondent; and his return to the family business in 1987, with the inevitable ups and downs of working in a company in which Dad is the boss.

Howard Holmes, 82, is the much-beloved chairman and has been doing things his way since 1936; Howdy runs day-to-day operations, slowly persuading his father to

modernize the operations. Even though boxes of "Jiffy" still don't list a convenient 800 number for consumer telephone inquiries, Howdy is lusting after a web page on the Internet, theorizing that it's the '90s equivalent to word-of-mouth advertising.

Certainly Grandma Holmes, who died in 1977 at age 86, never envisioned such a future for her product - named after what her father's housekeeper said when the day's biscuits and muffins were almost done: "They'll be ready in a jiffy." But she definitely was ahead of her time.

"My Grandmother Mabel wanted to make a product so simple even a man could do it," her grandson explains. Mabel's mix - arguably the retail industry's first prepared food - beat out General Mills' Bisquick introduction in the fall of 1930 by several months.

They've been rivals ever since.

A million bushels of wheat

On the tour of Jiffyville, Holmes says the big silos, 27 in all, hold about a million bushels of wheat.

"We're a complete manufacturer - we store wheat on site, we mill about 2.5 million bushels of flour a year, and we make four types of flour that we then mix with other ingredients to make our products," Holmes says, although what happens in the mixing room is a company secret.

"We make our own boxes at a company in Marshall," he continues, "so we do absolutely everything ourselves - package it, warehouse it, we have our own trucks. We're not really too dependent on outside vendors for many things - some raw ingredients, sure. We use 46 different raw ingredients, depending on whether it's a corn muffin or an apple-cinnamon or pie crust or pizza crust, but we try and do everything ourselves."

Apples are a biggie in "Jiffy" mixes: The fruit in blueberry and raspberry muffins is really apples - but what do you expect for 40 cents?

In the manufacturing process, milled flour is

blown pneumatically from the silos to the mixing department, where it is filtered through large shaking machines, sifted and blended with other ingredients, dropped three floors below and funneled into the packaging department.

Long-time workers

Holmes makes his way through the facility, alive with the whooshing and whirring of little "Jiffy" boxes being filled and rolled to the next operation on snaking, waist-high conveyors. He waves to the hair-netted employees, greeting them by their first names and affectionately patting their arms or shoulders, then points proudly to a board on the wall that lauds 20-, 30- and 40- year employees. The board is filled with names, including a team of second- and third-generation mechanics who keep the vintage packaging line in prime condition - 30 extra assembly lines are stores for spare parts and expansions.

Even the company guides, who conduct daily tours, are second-generation: Lynne Roskowski-Farley, 39, has been there 22 years; her mother Shirley Roskowski, now retired, logged nearly 19.

"It's an honor - I'm proud of the place," says Roskowski-Farley, who recently started training in the test kitchen with 10-year tester Julie Kimball.

Testing three times a day

In the modern, white kitchen - where Chelsea Milling bakes 12 batches of every product line every eight hours, 24 hours a day - Howdy Holmes greets Kimball, 37, who is making sure the cake and muffin mixes rise properly and taste the way they should before they're sent to packaging.

On the counter, baked goods are saturated with drops of a red chemical that shows whether there are any missing ingredients.

Kimball says her greatest on-the-job thrill is creating recipes for the booklet that Chelsea Milling gives out on request. Her favorite mix, because of its versatility, is Mabel's original in the 40-ounce box.

Thin and fit, Kimball obviously doesn't pig out on each batch she tests - although certainly the aroma is tempting.

"I pick at them," Kimball laughs, "but I have a high metabolism - and I run a lot."

Holmes doesn't overindulge much, either,

and he isn't into home baking.

"For me, not taking my work home would be not baking, not eating desserts and so on, because I was raised with that," Holmes explains, although he admits: "I might sneak in a hot fudge sundae every now and then."

But on the job, Howdy Holmes takes his baked goods seriously, and he is positively high on "Jiffy's" latest mix:

"I will go on record as saying that taste-wise and aroma-wise it is the most spectacular product that we've ever made.

"Whether it's going to be our bestseller or not, I don't know. Time will tell."

Just know you'll never read about it in an ad. You will however, find it on the grocery shelf in the little blue-and-white box, something Holmes says he'll never change too much.

"That would be putting way too many things at risk," he says.

But he is toying with updating the retro-looking photography - and maybe the products - "In the not-too-distant future."

On the other hand, one might implore:

If it ain't broke, don't fix it.