

the Flavor Meister

By Bob Woods

Blue Bubble Gum. Peruvian Passionflower. Twisted Bean Vanilla Brew. Nearly Nitro.

Names of the latest grung bands in Seattle? Nope, they're just a sampling of the more than 400 beverages created for nearly 120 different clients by Pro-Liquitech, Inc. The Louisville-based company was founded five years ago by David Dafoe, a "flavorologist" who succumbed to the lures of entrepreneurialism after a successful corporate stint with Brown-Forman Beverage Worldwide. What began as a one-dimensional consulting firm has since blossomed into a full-service operation that provides beverage makers large and small with everything from concept development to manufacturing planning.

So how did a zoology major at the University of Miami (Ohio) make the shift from fauna to flavors? Actually, the moment came in 1985 when he chose a job concocting alcohol flavors for Fries & Fries, a Cincinnati food company now known as Tastemaster, over going to medical school. Dafoe apparently was better suited to doctor potent potables than people. Even so, he got sick of that job after three years.

"One of my frustrations was that I would send out ingredient ideas and it was like they fell into a black hole," says Dafoe, 34. "Sometimes they would be used, sometimes not." The inability to taste the fruits of his labors finally led him to accept a job with Brown-Forman in Louisville,

IN BRIEF . . .

A young entrepreneur with a good taste for marketing uses his expertise in beverage flavors to attract some big bananas.



David Dafoe concocted Pro-Liquitech to help companies develop more than just new beverage products.

where he developed not only flavors, but also learned about beverage production, packaging and marketing. During his five-year tenure, he headed the Jack Daniels Country Cocktail and Southern Comfort Cocktail development teams and supplied cost-reduction research for Early Times Kentucky Whisky and Canadian Mist Blended Whisky.

Dafoe enjoyed his work and its challenges, but longed for a role that didn't fit his job description at Brown-Forman. "I was more interested in product development as it related to marketing," he recalls. "I took my ideas to the marketing department, but it was not set up to look at new ideas that they didn't come up with. They had a mission, and they stuck with it."

By January 1992, Dafoe had grown increasingly frustrated, and not even new job offers calmed his creative urges. That's when a sobering notion struck Dafoe:

What if he struck out on his own and offered his know-how, experience and ideas to the beverage community at-large as a consultant? When a Brown-Forman client, Chiquita Brands, said they'd be interested in such services, he took the plunge.

Since then, Dafoe has developed a number of juice products for Chiquita, including Cranberry Seabreeze, Light Orange Tangerine, Raspberry Passion, and Caribbean Splash.

Judging from his previous frustrations, it was fairly predictable that Dafoe would outgrow the singular role of consultant, that he'd want to be more involved in bringing beverages to market. And, sure enough, that's what happened. "Over time the company has evolved," he says, though not just because of his inclinations. "It's because of what our customers wanted, too. You don't go out there and plop something on the

table and just expect people to buy it. They want full service."

Today, with a lean staff of seasoned pros who possess skills in both flavor technology and product development, Pro-Liquitech offers a wide range of services, including concept development, technical research, prototype development, ingredient sourcing, laboratory testing, market research, focus groups, and line extensions. On the production side of the business, they'll establish manufacturing specifications and quality control standards, line up co-packers, interview distributors, and commission artwork for package design. And there isn't a beverage category foreign to them, from nutraceuticals to exotic fruit juices, coffees and teas to wine and vodka.

As in the case of Chiquita Brands, some of Dafoe's clients are huge companies that find a need to hire Pro-Liquitech. Sometimes the motivation is internal downsizing of in-house R&D teams, other times it's to breathe new life into a product line. While all business is welcome, Dafoe admits that his

favorite customers are the upstart companies that don't have internal staffs to develop products. "They have an idea and marketing money," says Dafoe.

A good example is Urban Juice & Soda, which markets soft drinks under the Jones Soda label. Pro-Liquitech has formulated at least 10 new products for the Jones line, including Vanilla Cola, Blue Bubble Gum, Cream Soda, Root Beer, and FuFu Berry. Beyond flavors, however, Pro-Liquitech has also supplied Urban Juice & Soda with co-packers and assisted in manufacturing.

Recently, Dafoe started doing business with a Brazilian company, for which he has developed flavored teas, exported the concentrate, hired co-packers and went on-site for a trial run. "We have all that experience, so we've built Pro-Liquitech into that kind of a turn-key service," he says.

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Much of Dafoe's new business has come from referrals, but last April, he began marketing his company's expertise through a Web site created by Andy McCarthy, Pro-Liquitech's Director of Business Development. "I thought he was nuts," says Dafoe of McCarthy's initial proposal to reach new customers via the Internet, "but I said I'd spend the money, because I believed in Andy. Well, we got our three largest customers off the Web site."

Besides tapping into the net, Dafoe keeps his ear to the ground, too, to know what beverage trends are afoot. He contends that coffee drinks are hot (Starbucks is one of Pro-Liquitech's customers), and that new age, nutraceutical, and exotic fruit drinks will remain popular. There's also a "retro effect," with a return to root beers and cream sodas. "You'll see a lot of that in the spring," he predicts.

Meanwhile, don't be surprised to see Pro-

Liquitech someday spring itself into the fray and become a bona fide beverage purveyor. "How can we do all this without striking out on our own?" Dafoe wonders rhetorically, yet also conceding that he's not sure the company's ready to get into the rough-and-tumble business of fighting for limited shelf space.

"It's fun to watch other companies do it, and I'd be lying if said I didn't have starry eyes. We couldn't do it now, but it's intriguing." □

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