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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. ---Several years ago a friend and I got lost driving around the Northwest Side of Chicago. We stopped at a corner bar to ask directions. The tavern's ambience was appetizing. Men were drooped over the bar like old branches weighed down by a winter storm. Ray Price sang "City Lights" on the jukebox.

My friend ordered a beer.

I asked the bartender, "Do you have any Beer Nuts?"

The bartender nodded to the tired men sitting in front of him and said, "Son, I got a bar full of 'em."

I've always been crazy about Beer Nuts.

I probably began munching on the sweet and salty glazed peanut that's made with the red skin intact in the mid-1970s. Each time I emptied the small quarter bag, I'd flatten it out on the bar like a new map. The small print said that Beer Nuts were made in Bloomington, Ill. That was like sipping from a glass of Baron Rothschild and thinking about Paris. Bloomington seemed so far away.

The Beer Nuts plant and outlet shoppe is nestled among the tall trees and old homes of a residential neighborhood on the east side of Bloomington, 140 miles south of Chicago. An abandoned, weedy Illinois, Central & Gulf train line abuts the back of the quaint red brick factory. On a sunny autumn day, a few of the 80 Beer Nut employees lunch at a small picnic table across the street in a sandlot that workers affectionately call "Peanut Park."

Sometimes things are just as you imagined them.

Beer Nuts celebrate their 60th anniversary this year. Beer Nuts have always been a family business, started in The Caramel Crisp Shop, a downtown Bloomington candy store run by the Edward Shirk family. In 1937 the nuts were called Redskins because they were prepared with their red skins intact. The family was already skilled at coating caramel apples and popcorn balls. So they began glazing the nuts.

The nuts were processed by hand in the store's back room and sold over the counter by the scoop. Orange drinks were served on the side. The name was changed to Beer Nuts in 1953 after the Shirks began packaging the nuts for the National Liquors store in Bloomington. With Edward's son Russell on production and Ellie Brewster as traveling salesman, the nuts sold like hotcakes in taverns.

"I don't know about you," says Jim Shirk, 53-year-old grandson of Beer Nuts founder Edward, "But they taste outstanding with a frosty beer. Sometimes I can't wait to sit down with a beer and Beer Nuts. They're OK with a Coke and lemonade. But to me and for Brewster, who was calling on taverns and liquor stores in McLean County - and who was a big beer drinker - it was a natural."

And, no, there's no beer in the nuts.

During a plant tour, Jim Tipton, manager of Beer Nuts marketing and communication, says, "In this day of focus groups who specialize in naming things, these guys (Russell Shirk and Brewster) just said, 'Let's call them "Beer Nuts" because they were so popular in bars.' It wasn't any big thing."

But Beer Nuts are a big thing in the Bloomington-Normal area. (Bloomington's population is 57,707; Normal's is 42,749). Beer Nuts are the region's second-best-known company, next to State Farm Insurance. Every year when the local Kiwanis group hits the streets to raise money for local charities, they don't give away candy in return for a donation. They use Beer Nuts as incentives.

All Beer Nuts employees come from Bloomington and nearby rural towns like Heyworth and Leroy. And many of them represent the Midwestern ethic of loyalty. "Oddly enough, we have a lot of sons and daughters of employees who worked here," Tipton says. "Not by design, it just happens that way."

Everyone from Drew Carey to David Letterman has exalted the beauty of Beer Nuts. And Tipton has heard every nutty joke. "We hear all of them at trade shows," Tipton says. "The one I hear over and over is . . ." Well, you can imagine.

Beer Nuts have been produced in their current 100,000-square-foot plant - a couple of progressions from the candy store - since 1973. The main production item is peanuts, with cashews and almonds making up the other 20 percent of the product. Tipton said Beer Nuts are popular in the Midwest and, for some unknown reason, they also do well in California.

The peanuts used in Beer Nuts are grated and cleaned as they arrive from Alabama, Georgia and the Carolinas. (Almonds are shipped in from California, and cashews are imported from India and Mozambique.)

The 110-pound sacks of peanuts are kept in cold storage, where they await their rebirth as Beer Nuts. By the thousands, the peanuts are dumped into six corrugated steel bins. The nuts slide through spiral chutes into a destoner machine, which catches foreign objects. The slide is necessary to keep peanut skins on as much as possible. If the peanuts were dropped, the skins would fall off.

"Since peanuts are dug up from underground (almonds and cashews grow on trees), you'll have rocks and sandstones that look like peanuts," Tipton explains.

"So we have to pick them out." The peanuts pass through a cushion of air so objects heavier than peanuts fall to the bottom of the machine.

For the final look, three or four women sit before a conveyor belt, picking out the 10 percent of the stuff the machine misses. When the belt starts picking up its pace, the scene resembles the madcap Lucy and Ethel chocolate bon-bon assembly line scene from the "I Love Lucy" show.

"I've stood in here," Tipton says. "I don't know how they do it. You look at the belt, it's moving fast, you look up and the whole room is spinning around. It drives them nuts." No pun intended.

Once all the peanuts have checked out, they move to the kitchen, where they're glazed with the family's 60-year-old "secret" process. Then it's a shot through the final taste test, into packaging and out to the corner bar.

Although Beer Nuts provide opportunity for barroom jokes, they are a source of pride in Bloomington. The outlet shoppe, full of gift baskets, Beer Nut ball caps and t-shirts, shot glasses and even fishing lures, is standing room only in November and December.

"A couple of months ago there was a little girl in town who, through the Make-a-Wish Foundation, wanted to see "The Rosie O'Donnell Show," Tipton says. "She brought Beer Nuts as a gift to Rosie. And very proudly Rosie set the nuts up on her desk. She simply loved it."