

T-shirts, technology and tofu tycoons

Making tofu is like baking bread, quilting or keeping a flower garden — it's a basic and noble activity that is done quietly and with reverence.

At Clearway Soy Foods manufacturer in Santa Cruz, the production of tofu is none of the above, except perhaps, the reverence. Technology has arrived at Clearway. Every week, 3,000 pounds of soybean curd are turned out from a maze-like machine that grinds the beans, mixes them with hot water, separates the soy milk from the bean particles and turns it out into huge pans, ready to be mixed with nigari, a coagulating agent that turns soymilk to tofu.

To a background of rock music, Bud Hamel and his 10 employees produce thousands of the creamy, high protein bricks that are sold in local health food stores and used in dishes served in several Santa Cruz County restaurants.

"I've been 'makin it for awhile," said Hamel. Before establishing Clearway in Santa Cruz three years ago, Hamel spent six years as part owner of a tofu company in Colorado. Prior to that, he worked for a business that grew mung bean and alfalfa sprouts.

He says he has always been involved in whole foods and that his "health food consciousness" goes back to when he was in grammar school.

When Hamel started Clearway, he had every intention of becoming a tycoon — a bluejeaned, T-shirted and ponytailed tycoon. He feels the marketing part of any product is universal, and is as much an

art as producing his popular product.

"Business is an art in itself," he said. "It must be run with understanding — it's real important to have a consciousness about what makes it. Marketing is marketing. I listen to the people in the three piece suits.

"The fine line is the ethic of dealing with your own workers and your own life. In that respect I may be different."

Hamel is dedicated to offering customers the freshest possible product, which is critical to the flavor of tofu. From soybean to store shelf is usually about 24 hours, he said. Tofu is packaged in water-filled plastic bags, and if the water is changed daily, Hamel said it will remain fresh up to one month.

With the new machinery from Japan in place, production runs can be 15 minutes apart. Each batch is about 78 pounds, he said. Tofu is made four days a week at Clearway, which is located in an old dairy on Soquel Avenue. Deliveries are five days a week.

Tofu from Clearway is considered firm in texture, it holds its shape when sliced and doesn't crumble as easily when cooked as soft tofu. Hamel said Americans prefer a more solid product, and it is the American taste he's aiming for as steady clientele.

"I had to understand where the palate (of potential customers) is. I don't want to advocate not using meat — tofu is always seen as a meat and dairy substitute. It's tremendously more versatile, more healthful. If you

use it with things people are used to, they will like it. You have to, make it taste good for those who've eaten meat and dairy all their lives. You have to reach people in their own language."

Hamel said he wants Clearway to be known as an American, not Asian tofu company. He plans to expand his delivery to the San Francisco Bay Area, and will offer different textures of tofu for the retail market. He presently supplies restaurants with extra firm tofu, which slices much like jack cheese.

Hamel's new machine makes tofu by the same method as the equipment he used in the past, so taste should not be affected. He recently changed the kind of organically grown soybean used in Clearway tofu, but said he is very satisfied with the result.

"Tasting it hot from the vat, that's the real reward," he said. "I don't get tired of eating tofu, I go to Staff of Life for a tofu burger quite often."

In the next week, Hamel hopes to produce a second product, amazake, a fermented

grain that is often served as a thick, sweet drink. Hamel said he plans to mix amazake with tofu and seasonings in a spread for crackers or bread.

"It's been said that you can't make it on tofu alone," he said. "I'll expand my product line — this dictates success. There is a low margin of profit in tofu. It's costly to ship because of its weight. It's a struggle, it's difficult. But it's nice to sell thousands of pounds a week. At least it shows promise when I go to the bank."

As a kid, Hamel wanted to become a football player, not a tofu tycoon. But he sees a connection and is happy with his choice.

"This is like football," he said. "It's like having the ball and running with it."

— BY CANDACE ATKINS