Darlene Brown, left, and Barbara White see candy through each step of its manufacturing process.

By ANNE PRICE
Newsfeatures writer

Most people don’t realize it’s there, but a small factory just 15 miles downriver in Sunshine produces handmade candies and flavored dessert coffees that are featured in specialty shops and gourmet catalogs around the world. “We’re sure trying,” says Beverly Buckley, who heads, manages and sometimes stirs the candy pot at Buckley’s Fancy Foods & Confections Ltd. “It’s awfully tough for a small business like us to go after a national market, to find our little niche and develop it, but each year it gets a little better.”

The original product and the foundation for the growing business is a secret English toffee recipe developed in 1958 by Beverly’s father, Spurgeon Buckley, who began making the candy to sell at the church bazaar in Newton, Miss. When someone sent a can of the confection to a friend in Atlanta with Buckley’s name and address, his mail-order business began through word of mouth. Buckley packaged his candy in old coffee cans, made candy for three months before Christmas and “quit when he got tired,” his daughter says.

“Then, right after Christmas, he started getting orders for next year,” she recalls. “He rigged up his own little contraption, and my first year in business I used his equipment, and it was tough. You could only make five pounds at a time, poured the candy on a marble slab.” Buckley’s now has a giant stainless steel...
with a contained heating element, ther- 
water-cooled tables, poured out and spread is rolled to each of three stainless steel, 
pot that constantly stirs the ingredients, 
with a contained heating element,ther-

Buckley's started business in 1981 in 
rented space next door to the present fac-

duced to go into the candy 
manufacturing business instead.

Like her father's original efforts, the 
major work period is July to December for the 
Christmas trade. Five people work in the 
kitchens now, but another two shifts will begin in July.

The walls of Buckley's front offices are 
decorated with framed advertisements and 
articles from major magazines and catalogs, 
and a display of all the Buckley can labels 
sits atop a filing cabinet. 

Buckley's candies are featured in ads in 
catalogs from prestigious stores such as 
pictures and copy on the product in its January issue and Time mentioned Buckley's in its 
last July's article on fancy foods. Town and Country lists the product as "one of the best gourmet foods by mail."

The company also sells candy for 
private-label packaging by Neiman-Marcus, Saks Fifth Avenue, Wolfman's and Hunter Home Plantation in 
Wythe, Va.

In July, the company introduced a 
new pecan butter brittle, and coated "Sunshine Pecans" went on the market in February. 
The coffee beans were Buckley's idea, and 
she experimented for months to get just the 
flavors desired in recipes she created for "Chocolate Mist" "Peanut Praline" and 
"Almond Toffee" coffees.

"I wanted a certain type of flavor, and I drank so much coffee I was absolutely shaking," she laughs. The coffee is packaged in 
whole beans, roasted in small batches by 
another small Louisiana business that 
uses our recipes.

"We had reached the point where we wanted to offer retailers different 
products," Buckley explains. But the original 
toffee, made of "pounds and pounds of but-
ter and margarine, sugar and almonds" in 
secret proportions, remains the backbone 
of the business. It's all-natural, no additives, 
no preservatives. The secret is in the recipe and the cooking process.

Every batch is taste-tested. What happens if it fails the test?

"If it's not right, it's in the garbage," says Buckley firmly. "It doesn't happen often, 
and it usually depends on the weather."

Louisiana heat and humidity make 
Buckley cautious in new ventures. She has 
had many requests for chocolate-coated 
toffee, but hesitates to venture in that di-
rection because of the climate.

Do she and her staff get wary of the very 
sight of toffee? Not at all.

Buckley's products are considered ex-
pensive, retailing at from $6.50 to 
$12.50 a can depending on the outlet 
and the retail market in a given area. But in 
Japan, where prices are sky high, "we are 
reasonable," Buckley says.

The company joined the Southern U.S. 
Trade Association and participates in 
foreign trade shows, and Buckley's husband, 
Robert Stern, does the design work for labels 
and advertising and recently designed a 
professional booth to display the products 
at major trade shows.

As the business expands, Buckley is looking 
for new ways to promote not only her 
product but all Louisiana specialty foods, 
and she wants to form a Louisiana Special-
ity Foods Association for that purpose.

"We need to work together so that we can 
help each other, share expenses of trade 
shows and advertising," she believes. "I 
have received lots of leads, including 27 re-
quests for pecans. The small food pro-
cessors need to be talking to share informa-
tion. There would be so many advantages."

"I haven't lost my taste for it," laughs the 
entrepreneur. "I find myself zipping through the back and grabbing a piece 
every day."

The new labels for the product include a 
picture of Buckley's father, and his picture 
is also in the new brochure.

"Dad still lives in Newton and says making 
candy was the hardest he ever worked," 
laughs Buckley, green eyes sparkling. "He's 
thrilled with the company, but he tells me 
all the time he's glad he doesn't have to 
make all that candy."

Last year, Buckley expanded, selling an 
interest in the company to four Baton 
Rouge businessmen while retaining 
controlling interest. And the company is 
moving into the international market this year.

The first shipment to France was made a 
couple of months ago - "it's probably 
actually just now getting on the market there 
because we shipped by water" - and in-
quiries have come in from Japan following a 
visit by two members of the board of direc-
tors to FoodEx, an enormous food show in 
Tokyo.

Most of the candy is packed in 
pound cans, but cans for France are 12 ounces in 
size, and the label reads "Louisiana Toffee" 
because the French don't warm up to 
English toffee.

"It's the same product," laughs Buckley, 
"but they didn't want it to be English. They 
wanted it to be Louisiana."

Buckley's products are marketed through 
brokers in different regions of the country, 
including Dallas; Atlanta; Phoenix; Colum-
bus, Ohio; Detroit; Chicago; Philadelphia; 
and Denver. Buckley says they are weak in 
the West but now have markets in Cali-
forinia, but none in the Northwest.

The factory sells nothing retail and 
doesn't store candy, making it to order 
except during the Christmas rush.

Ginger Coxwell, a childhood friend of 
Buckley's who joined the firm last year to 
help with sales and promotion, is excited 
about the company and its future.

"Bev and I have known each other since 
fourth grade," she laughs. "I came on in No-

dember, and the greatest fun is getting letters 
praising the candy. One lady called 
from Canada to tell us she had a sample and 
that she had to have some more. Another 
called and said the candy is addictive."

Buckley moves into the work area, where 
she is greeted by Gwen Meadows, who was 
her first employee and who "takes care of 
the product." Meadows, Rene Thompson, 
Barbara White and Darlene Brown begin to 
dump a pot of hot candy onto the tables and 
spread it with spatulas. It cools quickly as 
they cut the crisp squares and begin to pack it 
into cans.

"In the beginning, I did all the office 
work as well as handle production," Buckley 
recalls. "I swept the floors, I did it all, I 
still get involved back here. If we get be-

hind, I come back and label cans, take 
candy from the tables, you name it."

One shift can produce eight to 10 batches 
of candy, and when two shifts "keep the pot 
going" the output is as much as 1,200 
pounds a day.

Buckley's three sons, Peter, Spurgeon 
and Kelly Stern, often work part time when 
needed, and she enjoys the community of 
Sunshine.

"We won the second annual Sunshine 
Mardi Gras parade prize," she says pride-
ly.

But her enthusiasm bubbles about the 
business, and she has a genuine commit-
tment to manufacturing the best gourmet 
candies available.

"It's real satisfying," she says. "I like the 
idea of having a factory. It's rewarding to 
take raw material and turn it into a finished 
product."