Mello Joy wins battle in lawsuit over name

Richard Burgess
Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — An upstart coffee company that revitalized a popular brand name from decades ago has won a significant battle in its trademark dispute with rival Community Coffee Co.

Community Coffee filed two federal lawsuits earlier this year to stop the grandson of the founder of Mello Joy Coffee Co. from using the Mello Joy name.

A federal judge in Baton Rouge last week dismissed one of the lawsuits. A similar lawsuit is pending in federal court there, but it raises no new issues.

"It's like a large burden has been lifted off our shoulders," said Brian Begnud, whose grandfather, Louis Begnud, began using the Mello Joy name in 1931. "It's a victory not only for me but for the small companies battling the big corporations."

The issue is also pending in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office.

Community Coffee officials declined to comment on the case.

Mello Joy was a strong competitor of Community Coffee in south Louisiana from the 1930s to the 1960s. Brian Begnud re-introduced the brand name last year.

Community Coffee bought the Mello Joy name in 1979 and charged that Louis Begnud entered into an agreement that prohibited his family members from using the brand name. Mello Joy counters that no such agreement was made, and even if it were, the grandsons could not be held to his grandfather's agreement.

Mello Joy also argues that Community Coffee lost its right to the trademark because the company did not use it for roughly 20 years.

In the lawsuit filed in Baton Rouge, U.S. District Judge Frank Polito ruled that federal courts have no jurisdiction over the dispute, because Community was alleging a contract violation instead of a violation of federal trademark laws. Contract violations usually fall under the jurisdiction of the state law.

There has been little activity in the second lawsuit, which was filed in October in federal court here, but it differs little from the first.

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