



Business

Handmade Morning Glory tries to fill a niche

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These truths we know to be self-evident, at least in the state of Rhode Island: the lemonade comes from Del's, the Awful-Awfuls come from Newport Creamery, and the coffee syrup comes from Autocrat.

Double-check that last one.

A new coffee syrup has been showing up on Rhode Island's grocery shelves. This one hopes to win over coffee fans by appealing to their gourmet side.

Morning Glory Old Fashioned Coffee Syrup, handmade and distributed by a couple from Dartmouth, Mass., is made with real sugar instead of corn syrup and comes in a decaffeinated version. Autocrat sweetens its syrup with high fructose and regular corn syrup. Morning Glory's coffee syrup is sold in environmentally friendly glass bottles and cooked in small batches.

"We're high quality and all natural," says David Sylvia, who owns the business with his wife, Mary.

Because its syrup is made so differently, Sylvia doesn't consider Autocrat a competitor.

"We don't even compare ourselves to Autocrat because they're a different product," Sylvia says.

He says he doesn't want to sound snobby, but Autocrat is "more of a mass market" product.

"We're more high-end," he says.

Sylvia hopes restaurant chefs will drizzle his syrup on plate desserts, and customers will use it as an ice cream topping. He claims Morning Glory is thicker and stronger than Autocrat coffee syrup.

Lincoln-based Autocrat has been selling coffee syrup in Rhode Island since the 1940s. For decades, it competed with Eclipse, the other coffee syrup giant in the state. But in 1991, Autocrat bought Eclipse's name and formula.

The privately owned company won't reveal its sales or income figures, but president and chairman Richard M. Field Jr. offers a math problem as a clue to how much syrup the company produces.

"For just the greater Rhode Island area, Autocrat produces enough coffee syrup to make approximately 25 million servings of coffee milk per year," he said via e-mail.

There are 16 servings in each 16-ounce bottle of Autocrat.

Morning Glory started peddling coffee syrup to small markets in 2001, selling about a case a month and taking a financial loss. Now it sells in 32 locations in Massachusetts and Rhode Island and pours earnings back into the business. The company crossed state lines two months ago, Sylvia says.

Dave's Marketplace just ordered 25 cases, he says. Other Rhode Island carriers include Clement's Market in Portsmouth, Ryan's Market in Wickford and Eastside Marketplace in Providence.

Sylvia says the company has been accepted as a vendor by Whole Foods and expects to place an order this week.

He began making his coffee syrup recipe as a child. Everyone in his family made it, although no one's sure whether it came from his mother's or his father's side of the family.

"We'd make a huge batch and keep it in the fridge and use it at our leisure," he says.

One Christmas, Sylvia and his wife couldn't afford to buy presents, so they bottled their coffee syrup and gave it away. Recipients suggested they start selling it. At first they focused on Southeastern Massachusetts, which faced a coffee syrup void after New Bedford's Silmo went out of business. But moving into Rhode Island was "a natural progression," Sylvia says, especially since coffee milk is the official state drink.

Autocrat's Field admits to worrying about competition from start-up syrup companies, and says even large companies trying to break into coffee syrup "are a concern."

Autocrat says it already offers a gourmet syrup, which it markets as Newport Coffee Traders Iced Cappuccino mix. The product is sold only in 64-ounce bottles. Autocrat isn't planning to introduce a decaf syrup in response to Morning Glory's product.

"Decaffeinated coffee is consumed by only 10 percent of the adult population," Field says. "And coffee syrup is consumed mostly by younger people. Also, there is less caffeine in an eight-ounce glass of coffee milk than there is in one can of soda."

Nevertheless, the decaf option was one other reason Clement's Market decided to carry Morning Glory.

"It was different because it had a decaf and Autocrat and Eclipse don't," says Jerry Bloom, specialty food manager.

He also said the market is a big supporter of local companies, so he wanted to give Sylvia a shot.

More of the regular syrup has sold than the decaf, Bloom says. And Autocrat still sells much better.

"It's considerably higher priced than the others, so it's not flying off the shelf, but it's a steady seller," he says of Morning Glory.

Bloom sells Autocrat for \$2.39 a bottle and Morning Glory for \$4.99.

"It's really for the connoisseur," he says.

Rick Sylvia (no relation), specialty food buyer for Dave's Marketplace, agrees that Morning Glory appeals to a different clientele than Autocrat.

It's for "a customer who's looking for something new," he says.

David Sylvia says he hopes there are enough adventurous folks to keep his company growing. While he and his wife are still making a case at a time at her parents' commercial bakery, he says he hopes to get a distributor, expand to an automated production facility and quit his day job as a clinical manager for a home health-care company soon.

"I'm hoping at least to be able to turn this into a full-time job," Sylvia says.

What he's not aiming to do, he says, is knock down Autocrat.

"We're obviously not a threat to Autocrat," Sylvia says.

And he disagrees that trying to break into the Rhode Island coffee milk market is a nervy move.

"I think a lot of people are looking for this," he says. "It's an alternative."

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