Wonder Bread bakery says Southern California has gone stale

by Jennifer Davies

SAN DIEGO - Wonder (Bread) no more.

The iconic brand that helped define the eating habits of the baby-boom generation will no longer be available on shelves in Southern California.

Interstate Bakeries Corp., the maker of Wonder Bread and other baked goods, said Tuesday it will close g its bakeries in San Diego, Pomona, Glendale and Los Angeles. Other brands that will disappear in the region include Home Pride Bread, Baker's Inn and Roman Meal.

The move comes as Interstate Bakeries struggles to improve its business in the face of shifting consumer tastes and increased competition from lower-cost competitors. The Kansas City, Mo., company filed for bankruptcy in September 2004 and continues to lose money.

Wonder Bread exited the Washington and Oregon markets in 2005. Interstate had blamed its troubles on the now-faded low-carb craze, said Bob Goldin, executive vice president of Technomic, a food industry consulting firm. The company's real problem, he said, is that it has failed to change with the times.

"It's certainly a tarnished brand," Goldin said. "It hasn't done anything to compete."

Interstate said that in addition to its bakeries, it will close 17 distribution centers and 19 outlet stores. In all, about 1,300 workers in Southern California will lose their jobs. The company plans to deliver bread products until Oct. 20.

Interstate, which also makes Ding Dongs and Twinkies, said it plans to continue selling its Hostess and Dolly Madison products in the area.

Craig Jung, chief executive of Interstate, said the decision was difficult but necessary as the Southern California bread business continued to be a drag on the company.

Partly to blame for the closure, Jung said, was the high cost of doing business in California, including what he called excessive workers' compensation insurance costs and a confrontational relationship with one of the

company's main unions.

"We must stop reinforcing failure and press harder where there is success," Jung said.

Finding areas where Wonder Bread will be successful might be difficult as times have changed with bread consumption, said Susan Seligson, author of "Going With the Grain," a book that chronicles the history and culture of bread.

When Wonder Bread was introduced in 1921, she said, it was the first product to convince women that there was no need to bake their own bread or make a special trip to a bakery. The brand really took hold after World War II, when processed foods were considered the fashionable choice, especially as Wonder Bread was fortified with minerals and vitamins starting in the 1940s.

Children especially liked Wonder Bread because it looked so consistent and "didn't have all those creepy nooks and crannies," Seligson said.

Robert Thompson, director of the Bleier Center for Television and Popular Culture at Syracuse University, said Wonder Bread was ubiquitous in the 1950s and 1960s.

"It was the fuel that ran the baby-boom generation," he said.

Increasingly, however, consumers are seeking whole-wheat or artisan breads, Goldin said. By comparison, Wonder Bread seems woefully outdated, especially in California, where the natural-food movement was born.

"Food processing in the '50s and '60s was considered a good thing. Now food choices have made a nominal move to natural products, and Wonder Bread is not natural," Thompson said. "It doesn't even look natural. It's so white. It's a white that God never intended."

June Osbourne can't remember the last time she bought white sliced bread, let alone Wonder Bread.

"It's kind of out of style, isn't it?" she said Tuesday as she left a San Diego grocery store. If she does buy white bread, she said, it's a crusty sourdough from an artisan bakery.

Still, Wonder Bread has its fans.

Valerie Clinton of San Diego gasped when she heard the brand would no longer be available.

"Oh, wow! What am I going to do?" she asked.

Having grown up with it, Clinton said, she simply prefers the taste.

"It's sad," Clinton said as she headed toward her car with a shopping cart full of groceries, including Wonder Bread. It was on special, $5 for two loaves.

While some might consider Wonder Bread a low-cost product, that's not necessarily the case. In San Diego, Wonder Bread typically goes for $3.59. Van de Kamp White Bread is typically $1.29.

Goldin said that as sales of Wonder Bread and other bread brands declined, its delivery costs per loaf increased, forcing the company to raise prices.

"It's a high-cost business," Goldin said. "The drop sizes got smaller and smaller, so your costs go up and up."

Seligson said Wonder Bread's reason for being was that it could be made and sold cheaply.

"If you are paying more than $3 for Wonder Bread, there is so much good stuff you could buy for about the same price," she said.

Sylvia Arnold of San Diego said she loves Wonder Bread, but stopped buying it because it became too expensive about three years ago.

"It's what I was raised I on," she said. "I like it for nostalgia, I guess."

But nostalgia only goes so far nowadays, especially in a consumer society that prides itself on being hip and trendy, Thompson of Syracuse University said.

"Like so many things of that period, perhaps its time has come," he said. "It's like the pink-flamingo factory."

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