

# LUCKY PEACH



INTERVIEWS

## Return of the Snack

Reviving old candies and cookies, from Astro Pops to Fruit Chews.

By RACHEL BELLE

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**E**llia Kassoff is all about reviving the dead. After discovering his favorite childhood candy, Astro Pops, were no longer being manufactured, he made it his mission to resurrect the tri-color, rocket-ship-shaped lollipop, originally created in 1963 by actual rocket scientists who quit the space program to make the candy. Kassoff revived his family's candy company, Leaf Brands, famous for creating candies like Whoppers, Jolly Rancher, Milk Duds, and Rain Blo Bubblegum. Then he held a snack séance, and slowly, one by one, brought Astro Pops, Hydrox Cookies, Tart n' Tinys, Wacky Wafers, Bonkers! Fruit Chews, and others back to life and to grocery store shelves. The forty-seven-year-old Kassoff, who lives in Orange County, California, worked as a high-tech headhunter for eighteen years before accidentally falling into the candy and cookie revival business.

### What's the story behind Leaf Brand?

My uncle Ed, his father, and his brother started Leaf back in the 1920s. It was bought and sold a few times, before being acquired by Hershey's in the mid '90s. By that time, it was the fourth largest candy company in the country. But once Hershey's bought them, they just tossed the Leaf name away.

### **Why did you decide to restart the family business?**

It started off with Astro Pops. They were my favorite candy growing up as a kid. I called Spangler Candy, the company that had made them at the time, and asked their president what happened to Astro Pops. He told me that they stopped making them for marketing reasons, so I asked if he would consider selling the rights.

When I went after Astro Pops it was because they were a love of mine, nothing more. I figured if I could keep Astro Pops living, they'd be a cash cow. I would just get a distributor, get the manufacturing going, and then it would run itself, and I'd go back to headhunting, which was what I was doing at the time. Then I started to look at the product side, started bringing back old products, and I thought, *This is fun!*

### **How do you bring a product back?**

It really depends. Sometimes these products are so old there's nothing left. With Astro Pops we bought everything. All the machinery (which was hand-built by the rocket scientists who invented the candy) had already been sold off as scrap metal years before, but we got some of the old advertising and the old formulas. Astro Pops are a very complex product to make. The hot candy is poured directly into the wrapper, so the wrapper has to withstand a very high temperature. If your temp is too high you end up with a hard lollypop, if it's too low you wind up with mush. So that was a big challenge for us. It's been on sale for a couple years now and the customers love it.

With Bonkers candy, I had to look up an article from 1982 about the strike at the plant that made Bonkers. The article named two people. I used my skills as a headhunter to track those people down, and one of them was the guy who actually created Bonkers. He's in his eighties and has health problems. The research and development is much harder than just getting a name.

### **How much do you pay to acquire the rights to a candy like that?**

It really varies. It comes down to negotiating. It could go from \$30,000 to \$100,000, depending on what you end up with. If I ended up with the equipment it would be more. It depends on how powerful the brand was, when it left the market, and what you actually will get for your money.

### **You've gotten the most attention for bringing back the Hydrox cookies. I didn't even know they'd left the market!**

That's what I love about these old products. A lot of people come up to me and say, "I never knew it left!"

It's a very interesting history. It was the original sandwich cookie—Sunshine Biscuits invented it in 1908. Four years later Nabisco put out their Hydrox

knockoff, the Oreo. Nabisco was a larger company, so they overtook Sunshine, but Hydrox still had a very strong following.

Fast forward to the mid-nineties, when Keebler bought Sunshine. Their marketing department decided that the Hydrox name sounded too much like a chemical, so they changed it to Droxies. Kellogg's buys Keebler and plays with the cookie again, adding high fructose corn syrup to it. When they put it back on the market in 2008, it only lasted three months.

**Why was Hydrox a product you wanted to bring back?**

I was a Hydrox kid growing up because I came from a Jewish kosher household. We never had Oreo because that had, believe it or not, lard in the product. Hydrox was always known as the vegetarian, kosher product.

We put out a press release that we were bringing it back, and we had a big feature in *USA Today*. At a trade show, many of the old vendors found us and told us, "We used to supply the cocoa." Or, "We used to supply the vanilla."

Social media is another huge component. We want to know from our customers how the product is, and what can we change. We had what we thought was the closest formula, and we started sending out samples to people on our Facebook page.

Now, these people are cookie nuts. There were people who actually had Hydrox from the late 1990s in their freezer, and were still eating them. They really knew the nuances of the cookie. Somebody wrote to us and said, "I remembered it being a little bit shinier than this. What's going on?" And I wrote back, "You're absolutely right. We are working on giving it a little more shine." How the heck you can remember that is beyond me.

**Is there a product you wanted, but you weren't able to get the trademark?**

There was one: the Marathon Bar. M&M's-Mars made the Marathon Bar. It was a braided caramel chocolate bar—it was eight inches long. It was big in the seventies. I would have loved to bring that back, but M&M's-Mars figured out what we were doing and came up with a health food bar and they named it Marathon. So they kept the name.

**I see you're selling a candy called Farts. [NOTE: Farts are chewy little pebbles of colorful candy that come in sour or fruit flavors, like blue raspberry.] Is that something you've revived as well?**

Leaf, in its heyday, was known as a very innovative company. We work with the guy who created the Jelly Belly, David Klein, on some projects, and he had a product that he called Nublers. I was in his factory one day and he gave me the product to try and I said, "David, this is a great product, but the name sucks and the flavors suck." So I came up with the name Farts, because it was

fun and it made people laugh. We changed up the formulas and made the flavors much better, more vibrant. That's kind of how Farts came to be.

**Is your family thrilled you've reinvigorated the Leaf family brand?**

I surprised him, my dad. I took him to the local Gelson's, in Irvine—we were on our way to the movies and I said, “Hey, I have to stop at the supermarket and get something.” He was going to stay in the car and I said, “Get out of the car, Dad, I'm going to be a little while.” We walk to the cookie aisle and I say, “Oh, what's that?” And there's Hydrox in the cookie aisle. And he's like, “Oh my God! It's there!” There was an employee who was restocking, and my dad was like, “That's my son's cookie! That's Hydrox! Sell lots of it!” It was a lot of fun, because if it weren't for my dad I wouldn't have had Hydrox as a kid.

It's a labor of love to bring back all these great experiences that people remember. I hope to do more of that. I have the greatest job in the world. How many people get calls and emails from strangers thanking them for bringing their experiences back? To say to yourself, *I own my favorite candy in the world*—that's a pretty cool feeling. I don't even feel like I'm working.

CANDY, LEAF BRAND, SNACKS, WHOPPERS

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