



Photo by Linn Nishikawa.

BY BONNIE FRIEDMAN

Cathy Nobriga Kim has one of the sweetest jobs in Hawai'i. She runs the Roselani Ice Cream division of her family's company, Maui Soda & Ice Works, Ltd. In addition to being an ice cream manufacturer, the Wailuku, Maui-based business is one of the last several dozen independent Coca-Cola distributors in the United States. And in these days of the demise of so many family-owned small businesses, Maui Soda, as it is affectionately known here, is a bright spot, celebrating its 120th anniversary in 2008. An astonishing accomplishment for any small family business anywhere, especially in these challenging times.

A fourth generation Mauian and third generation ice cream maker, Nobriga Kim is the only female of five siblings, all of whom work in the family business. When she's asked how she got the ice cream division, it's usually her father, David "Buddy" Nobriga who answers for her. "Growing up, she could eat more ice cream than any of her brothers." That's true, but she's also a creative force when it comes to new flavors and, probably most important, she inherited her grandfather's and father's excellent taste buds. She loves ice cream and she's a purist. The nation's favorite flavor – vanilla – is her favorite, too. "If you

can make great vanilla," she says, "the rest is relatively easy." Today, Roselani produces a full range of flavors, most reflecting Maui's tropical locale, in institutional three-gallon tubs; eleven flavors like best-selling Haupia (an ice cream version of Hawai'i's beloved coconut pudding), Mango 'n Cream, and Classic Macadamia Nut make up the company's line of 56-oz. retail cartons.

Ice cream loving friends often express their envy, believing that Nobriga Kim gets all the free ice cream she wants. Not so. She buys her ice cream at different markets across the Island. "I have to be absolutely sure that our customers are getting the best possible product. The only way I can know that is by buying our ice cream at the same places our customers do."

Her work is sweet, but not always easy. "As the only woman division head, I'm not always 'heard' the first time I say something," Nobriga Kim says. And even when the rest of the family and/or staff eventually come around to her point of view, "it's important to never, ever say 'I told you so.'"

Simply DOING business in Hawai'i is challenging enough; the only way to cost-effectively move products – raw materials in and finished product out – is by boat. Add to that the fact that there is no product more fragile than ice cream. "It's so perishable, it's difficult to get distributors to touch it." And freezer real estate is

almost as difficult to come by as ocean-front property here. Witness the fact that it took 30 years to get local supermarket chain, Foodland, to approve Roselani Ice Cream for its stores and then only with the assistance of an aggressive Honolulu-based broker.

Being an "Island-state" also means that making changes considered minor to Mainland companies are not so simple here. "For example, switching from a square carton to a 'scround' required a careful and lengthy process. Each decision affects the next – designing the new package, having the package fabricated on the Mainland, minimum fabrication runs, the additional cost of bringing in a package that cannot be shipped flat, and on from there. I have to be absolutely sure that each decision throughout the process is correct."

The contrasts between the ice cream and beverage sides of the business are stark. One is the world's best-known soft drink brand – Coca-Cola – while Roselani ice cream is known, for the most part, to Hawai'i residents and visitors only. "Our beverage side has an open catalog from which they can get logo items, marketing materials, and more," Nobriga Kim says. "That's a luxury we don't have," she adds. "Our ice cream and everything around it is created from scratch – logo, packaging, collateral materials, even t-shirts and aprons – we can't offer as much as the bev-

erage side can although our wholesale customers would certainly love it. Fortunately, we work with a superb Maui design firm – Sae Design – which has helped us create a really fantastic Island identity."

And then there's the culture. Hawai'i is unlike any other State in the union. "We come from a plantation upbringing," Nobriga Kim explains. Like much of Hawai'i's local population, her ancestors – who were Portuguese – came in the late 19th Century to work the sugar plantations. "Our ancestors lived in camps, they got married when they were 13 or 14 and they didn't have the option of packing up the car and moving somewhere else. That makes for a culture much different from the Mainland." Regardless of specific ethnicity, "our culture here is one of respect and obligation. We are taught to give back not just to our community, but to our previous generations," Nobriga Kim says. In other words, being a business executive does not absolve her from numerous family obligations – not just to her own husband and three children, but to her parents, as well, even more so because all her siblings

are male. And yes, here there is still that difference.

With all the challenges of culture and location, Roselani's successes in the last several years have been significant. "Beginning in 2005, we went from being a Maui brand to being a statewide brand," Nobriga Kim says. "We have a stunning new carton, a more assertive marketing approach and we're aggressively working on a line of more 'gourmet' flavors that will be packaged in pints. One dream is to fully automate our operation and another is to have my own distribution center." Mainland distribution? Perhaps, someday.

Nobriga Kim notes that one of the biggest keys to recent successes is finding the right people in the community with whom to partner on specific projects. The 75th Anniversary flavor she created in 2007 is a perfect example. She was diagnosed with breast cancer the year prior – she's absolutely fine and cancer-free – and turned that diagnosis into something important and delicious for the community. She came up with a "pink" flavor – Aloha Cherry Truffle – and a marketing campaign using the fla-

vor's initials – "A.C.T. Sweet Now to Beat Breast Cancer." Local community college culinary students formulated the "chocolate truffle" component of the flavor and they now manufacture it for Roselani. Sae Design generously donated a gorgeous package design. And Roselani partnered with the Maui Memorial Medical Center Foundation to create a grassroots community program to promote breast cancer awareness and education. A portion of the price of every 56-oz. carton of Aloha Cherry Truffle sold statewide, benefits the program. A big "win" all the way around.

Other keys to Roselani's success are patience and perseverance on the part of its leader. "My goal is to reach a place where I can turn the duties over to the next generation and give them a company that they can grow, too." Sweet!

BONNIE FRIEDMAN is the owner of Grapevine Productions, a full-service public relations agency. She is also the owner of Tour da Food, offering small, custom ethnic food tours of Central Maui, and has co-authored two cookbooks. ☺

Maui Soda & Ice Works, Ltd.

CATHY NOBRIGA KIM

Sweet Taste of Success

Cathy Nobriga Kim (second from left) raises a spoon with her team to celebrate a new ice cream flavor.

