



EZ Brite president Edmond Aghajanian at the company's Westlake manufacturing facility.

MADE *in Westlake*

From soaps to syrups to paints, they're all produced right here in our city.

By Erica Jacobson

When Jill Ricker tells people about the variety of kitchen cleansers her company, EZ Brite, makes in its corner of Westlake, she often hears, "You're kidding me. I have that in my kitchen."

Part of EZ Brite's anonymity comes from the private label products it has made for such cookware companies as Calphalon and Corning, says Edmond Aghajanian, company president. The rest stems from the company quietly going about its business of shining and cleaning everything from copper pot bottoms to glass cooktops for decades.

"We've kind of been the local best kept secret for a long, long time," Ricker says.

Chances are, though, if you've scrubbed a pan or painted your bathroom tile or even ordered a flavored coating on an ice cream cone, you sampled some of what Westlake businesses have to offer. Three such companies — EZ Brite, XIM and Phillips Syrup — go about their business quietly and effectively.

"You can sometimes smell us as you drive by, whether we're making caramel or chocolates," says Phillips Syrup president Jim Kanner. Otherwise? "Nobody knows that I exist, and that's OK."

While EZ Brite's cleaners and XIM's paints can be found in stores, you've probably had Phillips coffee, ice cream and slushee flavorings without even knowing. Although Kanner wasn't about to name some of his largest clients, he did compare his work to another confectioner.

"I'm sort of a bizarre Willy Wonka kind of guy," he says.

The company started in 1921 with a simple orange flavoring stocked at soda fountains, then moved into the dessert flavoring market and has called Westlake home for the last three years. Kanner gets to the company's lab hours before the sun comes up to work on new flavorings including the coffee market Phillips' entered about five years ago.

"I kind of wanted to balance the peak season in the summer with something going on in the winter," he says. "It's worked out well, now we're making stuff year-round."

When he needs some extra inspiration, Kanner says he can be found in local coffee shops and ice cream parlors. He's easy to spot, his sundae or chai surrounded by pages of mathematical equations to make the company's next flavor.

"There's art and science and if you ignore either one it will fail," he says of his work. "Nobody wants to taste the science, they want to taste the art."

Getting products in the hands of hometown consumers can be tough.

Although it was founded more than 60 years ago with a cleaner for copper pots, Westlake-based EZ Brite more recently has focused on making cookware cleaners under the labels of other companies. The products didn't garner a lot of attention on their own — often found in boutique kitchen stores and local supermarkets rather than regional chains — until being green came on the scene.

"We sort of laugh at WalMart and all these guys running around and yelling that they're green," says Aghajanian. "Welcome to the club, guys."

That's because EZ Brite's products have always been wild about being mild, using just enough mineral- and vegetable-based ingredients to get a particular kitchen job done. And the philosophy carries over throughout the company. EZ Brite

literally does not have a garbage dumpster, and an overhaul of equipment has allowed the company to cut down on wasted product and packaging.

Its practices have caught the eye of some, earning the company kudos for its green initiatives. Others, including a local farmers' market, Aghajanian says, don't know what to make of a local, environmentally friendly home cleaning products company.

EZ Brite recently won a contract to provide Oberlin College with a range of cleaners. There, even the drums that leave the Westlake manufacturing plant will eventually return to be refilled as part of a low- to no-waste system that keeps consumers safe while they scrub.

"Why put something in the consumer's hands that can be misused? We feel it's a better way to do it," Aghajanian says. "We make it as natural as we can make it and we make it as targeted as we can make it so that none of it is wasted."

And the same concept is ready to be imported into such institutions as the city's schools and recreational centers as well as other colleges or even sports arenas.

"We're a local company, we want to go show people what we can do," he says. "There's not a lot of products made in this area anymore."

Dick Hardy's been waging the same battle for years at XIM.

His company started in the mid-1930s with a bonding product that, once applied to certain metals, allowed paint to stick where it once wouldn't. XIM expanded its product line through the years to include other coatings, primers and sealers. Contractors loved the products, Hardy says, because it allowed them to do jobs other painters and builders couldn't. What they didn't like was sharing their tricks of the trade with others.

"What do you mean 'your' secret?" Hardy recalls asking a particularly tight-lipped contractor. "We're trying to tell the world, not keep it a secret."

Product Lines

With decades of history behind them, each of these Westlake companies relies on a mix of products to keep longtime customers happy and attract new ones.

***ALTHOUGH YOU CAN'T** buy Phillips Syrup products directly, the company's original orange flavoring can still be found in various products today.

"We've played around with tropical fruits, but, fundamentally, we're in the Midwest," says president Jim Kanner. "We'd rather do good, old-fashioned comfort food here than take a chance on something funky."

The company has expanded into coffee flavors in the last few years adding chai tea, eggnog and peanut butter.

***ALTHOUGH KITCHENS** have changed quite a bit since EZ Brite first made its Penny Brite copper and stainless cleaner in 1947, you can still get a 7-ounce jar of the paste for \$5.49. The company also has developed the EZ Brite Cooktop Cleaner and Conditioner gel to tackle dirty ceramic and glass surfaces which sells for \$4.99 per 7 ounce bottle.

***AT XIM, SOME OF THE** most popular items with contractors have gotten a makeover for the do-it-yourself homeowner.

Instead of a two-part process kit, Tile Doctor paint now comes in an aerosol can for \$15.23 and will coat sinks and shower tiles without worry of damage from heat or water.

Peel Bond, a primer painters have used for years to fill dings and cracks in wood, is now in the Trim Magic. It goes on white, says company president Dick Hardy, but turns hazy clear when dry.

"It tells you when it's ready to paint," he says, adding the smaller size is more appropriate for most homeowners.



Phillips Syrup owner Jim Kanner is constantly working on new syrup flavors with his team, including his wife, Linda, who is head of public relations.