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Burnishing the Bosco Brand



By RALPH GARDNER JR.

After I wrote a column about the Elmhurst Dairy recently, I got an email from Josh Sanders, the project manager at Sea Breeze beverage systems. "We are the company that owns Bosco Chocolate Syrup," the message began proudly. It went on to thank me for mentioning Bosco in my story and offered to send me several bottles.



Mimi Ritzen Crawford for The Wall Street Journal

Empty Bosco bottles being filled with the chocolate syrup in Towaco, N.J.

It would be an exaggeration to say that receiving an email from Bosco was like getting a phone call today from my grandmother, who died in 1972. But it's not that far off. When I was a kid, growing up in the 1950s and '60s, Bosco was *the* chocolate syrup. I suppose Hershey's existed and Nestlé's Quik was around. But Hershey was better known for its chocolate bars and Nestlé's Quik was a powder that one mixed into milk, not a dessert topping.

Bosco, on the other hand, did it all: you could add it to milk or you could paint your ice cream sundaes with it. None of the other brands boasted Bosco's excitement—due in part to its ubiquitous ad campaigns, celebrity endorsers and innovative marketing. The day Bosco arrived at our home in a Bosco Bear

dispenser was a major milestone in my childhood.

If anything was wrong with the brand, as I mentioned in my Elmhurst Dairy piece, it was only that I wasn't allowed to have enough of it. Just when I was getting started emptying the container into a tall glass of milk, or creating a drip painting, à la the Abstract Expressionists, with the dark chocolaty syrup atop a small Kilimanjaro of vanilla or coffee ice cream, some fascistic baby sitter would snatch it out of my hands and tell me I'd had enough.

Needless to say, I was excited to receive Mr. Sanders's gift of Bosco. Perhaps even more thrilling, there were no caregivers around to tell me to let go of the bottle. So I basically drowned a bowl of vanilla ice cream in it last weekend. Most childhood memories don't stand the test of time. Resorts you return to, for example, that you thought were big, even mythical, turn out to be modest. Reruns of TV shows or movies that had you riveted to your seat as a 10-year-old seem hokey and contrived.



Mimi Ritzen Crawford for The Wall Street Journal
Josh Sanders behind a box of Bosco chocolate bars.

So I'm pleased to report that Bosco tastes just as great as I remember it.

But here's the question: If it tastes great and is apparently still being manufactured, why doesn't it hold the post position in American culture, at the very pinnacle of the chocolate milk enhancer/emulsifier category pyramid? Why are today's kids drinking beverages such as Gatorade and Red Bull when Bosco is still out there?

Clearly, someone dropped the ball, and I wanted to find out who it was and what could be done to restore Bosco to its rightful place at the crossroads of American consumerism.

When Josh Sanders sent me my complimentary Bosco, he also enclosed an invitation to tour their factory, in Towaco, N.J., about 45 minutes from the city. Last Tuesday, I gladly accepted—less because I wanted to see Bosco being made than because I wanted to knock heads, gently, to see what we could do about resurrecting the brand.

Josh and his father Steve Sanders, the president of the company, made my argument for me as we sat in their wood-paneled conference room after the tour and screened YouTube clips of Bosco ads from TV's golden age. One of them, from 1959, starred a young Dick Van Dyke.

"What's changed?" I demanded when we were finished, referring to Bosco no longer being No. 1. Surely, not the great taste of Bosco.

"What's changed?" Steve Sanders sighed. "There were some big marketing dollars back in the day when it was owned by CPC."

He was referring to the giant corporation that sold the brand to Sea Breeze, a company started by Steve's grandfather in the 1920s and that specializes in supplying soda fountain concentrates.

"Hershey's happens to be pretty dominant in this category," he went on. "Hershey's is a large, multibillion-dollar company. But that's what makes this country great."

No, it's not. What makes this country great is Thomas Edison inventing the light bulb; [Steve Jobs](#) and Steve Wozniak building their first computer in Jobs's Los Altos garage; and Bosco, on the rebound, like a prize fighter whose legs are gone but whose heart is bigger than ever, shooting for the title one last time.

Steve claimed he wasn't throwing in the towel. "We're relying on the nostalgia. It's working very well."

It can't be working that well, because no one under 40 I mention it to has ever heard of Bosco. And I haven't spotted it on most supermarket shelves. But demand obviously still exists: Josh Sanders said they removed their phone number from their website because so many people were calling to reminisce. "They wanted to chat with our receptionist," he said.

Playboy magazine also reached out. They apparently had big plans for Bosco in one of their pictorials, and I suspect it could have singlehandedly resurrected the brand. "The secretary took the call," Steve Sanders said. "She refused them. We tried to reach back to them but we could never make the contact."

The Sanders also mentioned that Vik Muniz, a Brazilian artist who lives in Brooklyn, paints with Bosco, and has sold some of those paintings for six figures through Neiman Marcus. And of course there's that famous "Seinfeld" episode where George reveals his ATM pin code—"Bosco"—to J. Peterman's mother on her deathbed. But that's ancient history. That episode first aired in 1995.

We need something hip and now. We need a celebrity endorser, a current-day Dick Van Dyke, someone who

enjoys the trust of parents and children alike.

"Jennifer Aniston," suggested Mimi Ritzen Crawford, my photographer.

Or how about a mascot? Someone like Mr. Met. Or the [Geico](#) gekko. Or the [Aflac](#) duck. Hey, what about Bosco Bear! Where is he these days? Let's drag him out of retirement. Bosco Bear could become the panacea, the solution to all our ills, a chocolate syrup savior.

"We have a Bosco Bear costume for special events," Josh Sanders revealed.

"No one wants to wear it," his father said. "It's too hot."

Ms. Crawford, chock full of good ideas, turned to me and said, "You can be Bosco Bear for Halloween."

"We'll even pay you the \$5 an hour we typically pay the Bosco mascot," Josh Sanders said.

I'm considering it.

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