

A photograph of a man with a grey beard and mustache, smiling broadly. He is wearing a white chef's hat and a white long-sleeved shirt. He is seated in a black wheelchair. He is wearing white gloves on his hands. The background shows a kitchen with various equipment like a coffee maker and a kettle on a counter.

Chef Paul Prudhomme:

Blending Balance and Consistency for Success

CHEF PAUL PRUDHOMME



A passion for just the right spices for just the right taste enlivens Chef Paul Prudhomme.

With a flourish, Chef Paul Prudhomme added his name to the inscription in the cookbook, then looked up and said, “Tell your daughter the first part is my personal philosophy. The second part is how she should live her life.”

His philosophy — “Good cooking. Good eating. Good loving.” — and accompanying grin is familiar to almost

anyone who has met Chef Paul, seen his TV program or even picked up a catalog of his Magic Seasoning Blends. But it is his words to live by — “Quality gets all.” — that brought Chef Paul himself from a farm in Opelousas, La., as the youngest of 13 children to world renown for his ability to blend just the right spices for just the right taste and produce a blended product that holds prime real estate in grocery stores across the nation.

At Prudhomme’s 125,000-square-foot

Good cooking.

Good eating.

Good loving.

Quality gets all.

Magic Seasonings blending plant in New Orleans, 20 products and thousands of custom blends are created, packaged and shipped to retailers, foodservice chefs and food manufacturers around the world. The plant is managed by President and CEO Shawn McBride, but Chef Paul continues to be the creative force behind the blends, with a research center, literally, in his own backyard and an innate taste for the perfect blend.

THE FLAVOR. Enthusiastically describing one of his most recent custom blends, Prudhomme said, “I hope they understand it because it was super complex. What is complicated is that when you start chewing on it, it just constantly flips the flavors. It just turns them over and over.”

“I can usually get a flavor that dominates and it’s at the end, not in the beginning, so you taste other things. But it was the first time that I felt that we had hit another level,” the Chef added, unable to hide his zeal. “For three or four days, I’d wake up excited, saying, ‘Can we send it out yet?’”

It is this understanding of the human palate that puts the “magic” into the company’s blends. “It’s balanced. There isn’t one ingredient, like salt, that hits you smack in the face,” McBride said. “Whatever you’re cooking, he wants you to taste that first, then the seasonings just enhance it. It’s not meant to hit the front of your tongue. He thinks about where that flavor is going to hit your tongue, how

it is going to travel through your mouth and where it is going to end up.”

“You can eat a plain piece of meat, but when you season it, you open up a whole new world,” Prudhomme said.

While Prudhomme maintains a role in the plant processes, it is the research and development that is really the best job for him, he said. “It’s more fun doing the creating. I really enjoy constantly doing new

blends and getting flavors out, but if I can get something out for a customer that will make their customer really happy, that’s the goal always.”

But, Prudhomme added, it is more than just the taste of the blends. “One of the things that is most important to me is that we are putting things in people’s bodies,” he said. “I feel very strongly that herbs and spices are one of the best things we can put in our bodies, because it’s where medicine generally comes from.”

Adding seasoning blends to plain meats opens up “a whole new world,” Prudhomme says.



HUMBLE BEGINNINGS. Chef Paul’s appreciation for the magic of good food started at an early age. The kids could all have been outside fighting, then come to the dinner table mad at each other; but once they started eating, you could tell when it was a really good meal. “In no time at all, in minutes, they had forgotten they were ever mad at each other. Everyone was talking and having a good time,” Prudhomme said. “I recognized that probably by about seven or eight years old. I remember thinking, ‘Food did that.’ And it’s still with me.”

After completing his schooling, Prudhomme traveled, working in restaurants around the country learning different styles, techniques and ingredients. He then came

back to New Orleans in the early 1970s to open his own restaurant. He had four restaurants fail, “then I started understanding the restaurant business — thank God!” His current restaurant, his eighth, in New Orleans’

French Quarter, K-Paul’s Louisiana Kitchen, opened in 1979.

It was from this restaurant that the seasoning company evolved. Customers would commend the food’s flavor, asking “What are

you putting on it? Can I get some?” So the restaurant started giving a bit of seasoning wrapped in foil. But soon, those customers began coming back asking to purchase the seasoning, so K-Paul’s put together hand-labeled, plastic, zip-close jewelry bags filled with the seasoning. As demand grew, Chef Paul realized the business potential, and opened the Magic Seasonings plant in 1983.

While maintaining his role as formulator of the Magic Seasonings Blends, Prudhomme has become a national figure, appearing on talk shows, hosting a cooking show, consulting with restaurant chains and major food manufacturers to develop specialty dishes and cooking for heads of state, including President Ronald Reagan’s 1985 inauguration, and at the Congressional Barbecue on the White House lawn in 2007.

“It’s a tough industry,” Chef Paul said of blended seasonings. “But I think it’s very rewarding to be able to, literally, make people happy. That is one thing I know that hasn’t changed. If you put something in somebody’s mouth that’s really great, it makes them happy.” **QA**

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Chef Paul’s retail blends began as restaurant seasonings wrapped in bits of foil.





Founder Chef Paul Prudhomme and President and CEO Shawn McBride keep the magic flowing at Magic Seasoning Blends. (Photos: Michael Palumbo Photography)

MAGIC SEASONING



Consistency is the first rule of quality for Chef Paul Prudhomme and his Magic Seasoning Blends.

Chef Paul
Prudhomme
Blends Balance
and Consistency
for Success

At Magic Seasoning Blends, the first rule of quality is consistency. With the blends by company founder Chef Paul Prudhomme created to hit just the right spot on the tongue at just the right time with just the right build of flavors, even a minor change in a single spice can throw off the balance and significantly change the resulting taste.

Such inconsistency may not matter to some processors, but with customers ranging from five-star restaurant chefs and major manufacturers to home cooks, all of whom are relying on the product to create consistent recipes, it is of utmost importance to the Magic Seasonings team.

To explain the effects of even minor differences, President and CEO Shawn

McBride cites the example of one's favorite menu item at an oft-visited restaurant. You order the dish expecting a certain flavor, tang or bite. If the dish is served spicier than expected or more bland than usual, you may think it is your taste buds, or you may find a new favorite — at a different restaurant. The same holds true of a packaged item or even home-cooking with a favorite seasoning.

PRODUCT RESPONSIBILITY. “The further we go in this business, the more we realize what

a big responsibility we have,” McBride said. This holds true whether the seasoning is being used by home cooks on a limited income who don't want to ruin their food with too much spice or by a chef in a restaurant who is coming at it from a whole different angle. “If they use our seasoning and every time they know that they will deliver that same taste to the customer — that is a big responsibility for us.

“We know that we're putting our name on the line with them, and they're putting



Checking the flour tailings for contaminants is critical to quality assurance.

their name out there,” she said. “So if we can't deliver what they're promising to their customer, then we're failing right from the start.”

It is, in fact, an area that has continued to fascinate Vice President of Manufacturing David Hickey. “These are people who are used to consistency,” Hickey said. “If the ingredients change, I get calls like, ‘Did you change the pepper?’” adding consumers really do want consistent formulations.

QUALITY ASSURANCE. To ensure this consistency, Magic Seasonings' quality control practices are in effect from its single-field sourcing of each spice and herb to its final metal detection just before sealing of the packaged blend — with quality assurance blended throughout. As defined by Jacob Wanda, quality manager and director of technical services, quality control is the set of practices implemented throughout the chain for the delivery of a quality product; quality assurance is the overseeing of these practices to verify and validate their effectiveness.

For example, many plants have HACCP

plans, but the real question is, “Do you verify it?” Wanda said, adding that questions such as “Is it working? Is it certified? Is it reviewed?” should be asked and answered routinely. A HACCP plan should be reviewed internally on a regular basis and certified annually by an independent agency.

Such reviews are just one of the processes Wanda implemented when he joined the company 10 years ago. “They had the basic skeleton program in place. My job was to come in and tailor it to the standard that we have today.”

“The missing link was the formality of it,” added Hickey, who has been with the company for 24 years. “We had the manufacturing process, the core of it, but we needed the written procedures.”

Wanda’s greatest learning curve came with adjusting to Chef Paul Prudhomme’s definition of quality. “There are so many different definitions of quality,” Wanda said. “Chef wants a superior product, and not only superior, it’s got to be consistent and it’s got to be satisfying to the customer.”

Getting a consistently superior, satisfying product is not easy when your products are created from more than 800 ingredients — all with considerable variance. “If you start with a wide variance, it makes your job harder to get a consistent finished goods product,” Wanda said. “But if you keep that variance to a workable minimum, then your finished product is much easier to attain.”

MAINTAINING CONSISTENCY. Keeping that variance to a minimum while ensuring a safe and secure product means the incorporation of detailed standards while the ingredient is still in the field to its delivery to the Magic Seasonings’ customer.

- *Supplier approval process.* All Magic Seasonings suppliers must go through an approval process, which includes a full evaluation, tracking and traceability standards and on-site visits.
- *Annual contract.* “For consistency, we like to contract our ingredients on an annual basis,” Hickey said. “The goal is to select each year’s black pepper so it fits our needs and is consistent with last year’s.”
- *Single-field sourcing.* In order to control the quality and consistency of each ingredient, Hickey said, they sample harvested herbs and spices from various fields and approved suppliers, and once selected, all deliveries of that ingredient must be from the same spot in the same field.
- *Sensory testing.* Prior to each delivery of each lot, a pre-shipment sample must be sent in advance. Only if the sample tests as consistent with the quality and taste set for that ingredient is delivery accepted. When shipments arrive at the plant, random samples are taken and compared to

pre-shipment samples, Hickey said. “And the two must be a match.”

Down the line, sensory testing also is conducted of the final blend to ensure all ingredients hit the proper spot on the tongue at the proper time and the resulting taste is consistent.

- *Automatic hold.* All inbound raw materials are subject to quality control inspections, with all sensitive ingredients placed on automatic hold. Only when the ingredient tests to Magic Seasonings’

quality and safety levels is it released to storage or use.

SAFETY AND SECURITY. In addition to quality processes for consistency and customer satisfaction, Magic Seasonings focuses its processes on food safety and security to prevent purposeful or inadvertent contamination of product or ingredients.

- *Entry points.* The company is implementing a system where each employee is is (continued on page 74)

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- sued a digital ID tag for building access. Entry is only authorized if the person is scheduled for that shift, and a camera ensures only that one person enters. Delivery persons enter the facility into a locked, fenced area. When identification is verified, then the person is signed in, escorted and delivery can continue.
- **Packaging.** In addition to quality and safety checks on incoming raw materials, Magic Seasonings also conducts tests on packaging. “A lot of people neglect packaging,” Wanda said. But, particularly where it will contact the food, a contaminant in or on packaging surface could affect the finished product.
 - **Ingredient definition.** For quality and safety, materials are segregated into categories at the plant:
 - Major or minor ingredients — salt, sugar and/or flour form the basis of most blends, so these major ingredients are purchased and stored in bulk, with salt and sugar in 1,500- to 2,500-pound packaging and flour received by the silo.
 - Materials that are more susceptible to contamination are classified as sensitive and undergo more stringent inspection and testing, whereas non-sensitive ingredients can be put more directly into use.
 - Allergenic ingredients are stored separately with visible labeling and segregated throughout the process.
 - Most Magic Seasonings blends are manufactured under kosher supervision; any non-kosher raw materials that are purchased are treated similar to allergens: They are labeled and segregated from other ingredients.
 - **Monitoring.** Spices are notoriously susceptible to insect infestation, so an active monitoring program is critical; pheromone traps are placed throughout the warehouse. “We walk the white line every day,” Hickey said. “Pheromone traps help you to be proactive. When we see counts going higher, we get the ‘bug detective’ in to fight it.”
 - **Contaminants.** From the moment an ingredient arrives for delivery to the final outbound packaging of the finished product, checks are put in place for screening and removal of contaminants. A sifting of tailings at the base of the flour silo provides a first check against contaminants — from insects or metal fragments — and further lab inspection and testing protects against non-visible contamination. Each spice also is screen sifted by hand as it is blended, enabling the employee to further check for

contaminants while the screen reduces pass-through.

- **Line records.** Each line has a five-page recording document tracking lot and batch codes against Magic Seasonings’ quality process. The pages include checklists for: pre-op, documenting equipment inspection, cleaning, corrective action and employee handwashing; hourly checks of specifications such as weight, labels and lot codes; statistical process controls; testing, such as metal detector calibration and verification and reject documentation; and line employee identification. “This report has everything I would need to investigate a complaint,” Wanda said.
- **Metal detector.** The CCP on every production line at Magic Seasonings is a metal detector through which the blend passes just before its final sealing.
- **On camera.** Throughout the plant, cameras document activity, tracking personnel and processes. While the system is tied into plant security, it also provides training opportunity, Wanda said. For example, footage from the video camera mounted above the blending area has been used to train employees on everything from proper blending and product dumping to improper lifting and handling. It also can be used to verify that proper amounts of each ingredient were used in a particular blend.

EDUCATION. Such opportunities for training are critical to Magic Seasonings’ future, McBride said. “For us, as we grow, education is so important within our staff. (Prudhomme’s) main job is being a teacher. Besides creating, it’s being a teacher for the next generation.”

And education is not only internal for Magic Seasonings. The company holds seminars and tours for various groups from chefs and processors to elementary school classes, McBride said. “Our philosophy is the more we can teach people about taste and about herbs and about spices, the better off they will be and the better off we will be.”

“The things that we do are not secret,” Prudhomme said, “because it’s hard enough to do, that 99.9 percent of people are not going to do it. They don’t have to. We don’t have to. It’s not just about business, it’s about consistency and doing the best you can do every day.”

It’s about passion. “Chef hammers that to us a lot,” Hickey said. “You should have your heart in what you do here. If you don’t, then you’re not going to succeed.” **QA**

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