

In Mint Condition

Bill Martin detects subtlety of sweet odors in his job at Goldendale plant

By Jeanie Senior

The powerful smell of mint—pungent, sinus-clearing—permeates the air at the A.M. Todd Company plant on South Columbus Avenue in Goldendale.

To Bill Martin, it's a familiar scent. He started working for Todd 34 years ago as a high school student in Kalamazoo, Michigan, where the firm is headquartered.

Now a Goldendale resident, Bill has been based at Todd's Klickitat County plant for four years. The title below his name on his business card says simply "Formulations," but there is nothing simple about his job.

That is because mint, which Todd's Web site calls "one of the world's most coveted and complex crops," can be evaluated chemically only up to a point.

After that, Bill says, "Odor is the ultimate test. You can have all kinds of specifications, but if it smells good, it's going to taste good. Odor evaluation is key."

Bill is the key person who performs that task at the Goldendale facility. He evaluates mint oil when it arrives at the plant, fresh from harvest and distillation, a step he calls "proba-

bly the toughest grading" for the product. Then, he tests it again after it has aged for a few months.

Perhaps most important, he has the ability to smell a mint blend prepared for a customer in a previous year, and formulate a matching blend from this year's crop.

Whether it's peppermint or spearmint, Bill says the characteristics can change from year to year, depending on the weather. Not surprisingly, mint grown in different regions has its own peculiar qualities.

"The second evaluation, I'm building something for the end user, trying to come as close to what I think he wants, and match it with what we sold him last year," says Bill.

Except for Bill's sophisticated ability to smell the differences between each sample of mint oil, it is a pretty low-tech process: He

dips a narrow strip of blotting paper in a sample and holds it under his nose, concentrating on the odor.

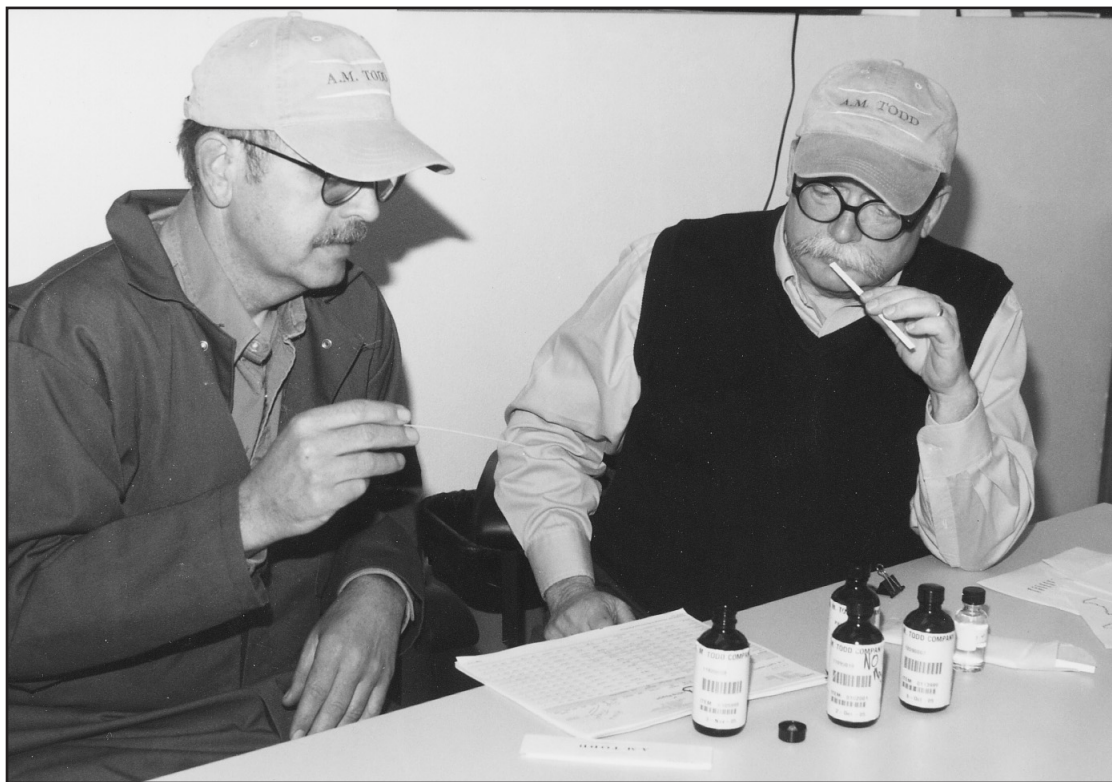
Bill is looking for the subtle differences. Incoming and outgoing oils at the plant, ideally, are evaluated by an "odor panel" of three people, he says.

According to Bill, people with a natural ability to distinguish differences in mint's odor can do double duty and be trained to work on an odor panel.

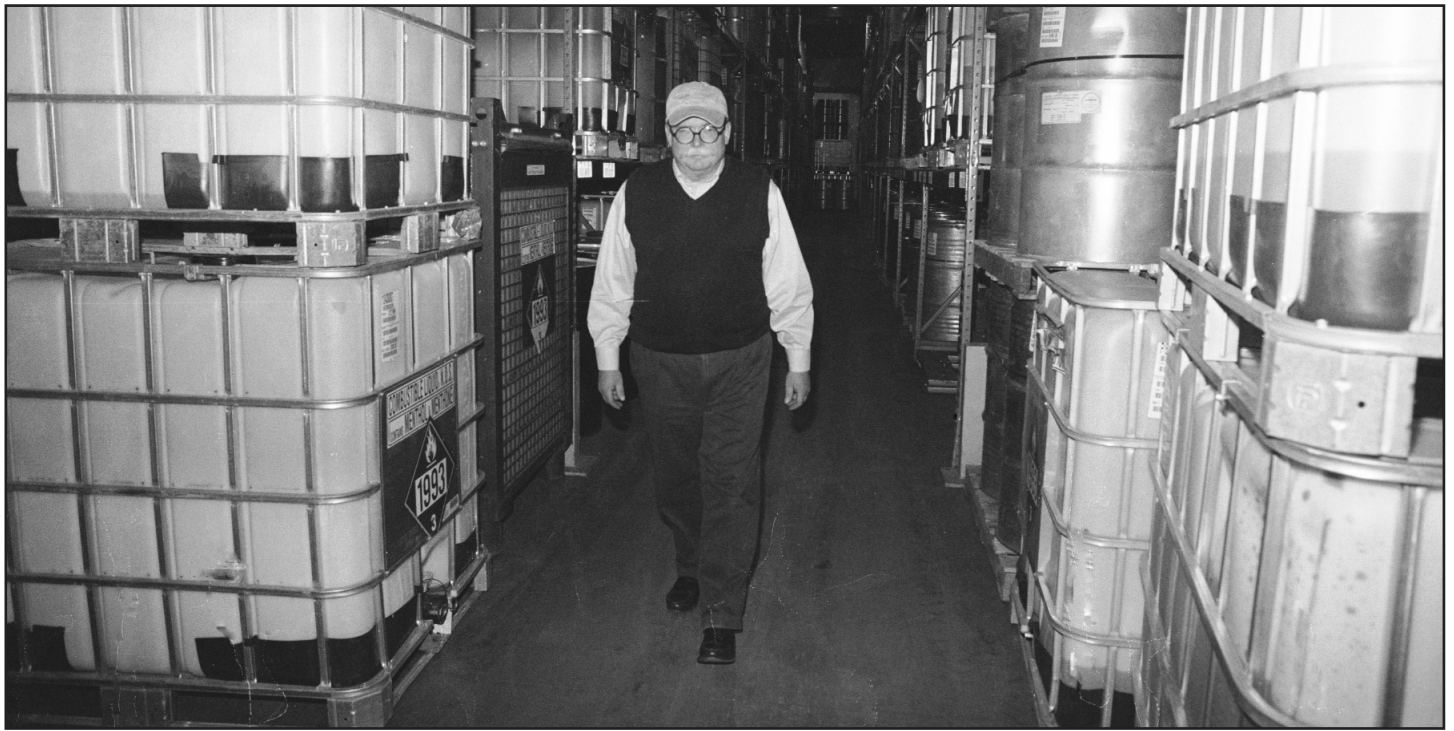
"Over the course of years, you become more and more attuned," he says.

When Todd built the Goldendale facility about a decade ago, it was only intended to be a collection station for mint oil, which would be shipped back to Kalamazoo for blending.

The location was important:



Above, Bill Martin, right, and Goldendale Plant Manager Dave West sample mint varieties by smell at the A.M. Todd Company plant in Goldendale. Opposite page, Bill walks through a row of mint oil containers.



Goldendale is centrally located to receive oil from growers in the Yakima Valley, the LaGrande, Madras and Willamette Valley regions of Oregon and Northern California.

Bill says eventually it made sense to add formulation and blending to the facility.

With expansion came concerns that it might be difficult to find skilled help locally.

“We quickly found that not to be the case,” Bill says. “There are a lot of people with a lot of degrees and talent living here because they want to live here. The staff here is outstanding.”

Five years ago, he was flying “back and forth and back and forth” between Michigan and Goldendale. It was “two weeks here, two weeks there, during the height of the season.”

Bill became fond of the area, and he and wife, Carol, eventually decided to move to Goldendale, 2,000 miles from the place where they had always lived. With their children grown and out of school, he says they thought they wanted a change in their lives and talked about moving away from the city.

Four years ago, the Martins

bought a small acreage outside Goldendale and built a house. They are enthusiastic boosters of their new hometown and active in the community. Bill is on the board of the chamber of commerce.

“We put a lot of effort into being part of this community and it’s paid off,” he says. “We both really like it here. We’ve made a lot of friends and truly intend to retire here.”

Washington’s climate is a decided improvement to Michigan, he says. Summers in the upper Midwest are hot and humid, winters are cold “and it snows like crazy.”

“One of the beautiful attractions to this part of the world is no mosquitos,” says Bill. “We live on our front porch in the summer. In Michigan, when the sun goes down, you go inside.”

Bill says Goldendale “is one of the best-kept secrets in this part of the world.”

Carol, who in Michigan worked in the school system helping children with developmental disabilities, now works with Head Start in Goldendale.

One of their daughters—who has two children—lives in Grand Rapids, Michigan. Their other

daughter is in Seattle.

The Martins have two bloodhounds, both retired show dogs.

“They’re like no other dog,” Bill says. “Amazing, very loving, stubborn, quiet, drooling.”

Now, when Bill makes a business trip, it’s back to Kalamazoo, where the company was founded in 1869 by Albert M. Todd.

Todd grew mint at two large plantations in Michigan, called *Mentha* and *Campania*.

Michigan’s mint industry flourished. By 1900, Todd was the world’s largest producer of peppermint oil.

The company, still owned by Todd’s descendants, remains a giant in the mint business, but most of the farms that produce mint have shifted to the west.

Mint now is a global business, but not all regions like the same mint flavor. Bill says Europeans tend to prefer stronger mint; Americans “like a milder, candy cane-like mint.”

But it is a popular flavor all over the world.

“If you’ve ever brushed your teeth or chewed gum, we’ve touched your life,” he says, smiling. ■