

Black Bear Bottling to hire 15 following expansion

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Black Bear Bottling Group LLC in Oak Creek plans to hire about 15 employees in 2016.

A beverage co-packing company in Oak Creek expects to hire up to 15 new employees in 2016 to keep up with customer demand.

[Black Bear Bottling Group LLC](#) invested about \$5.5 million in the last 18 months in a plant overhaul that added 80,000 square feet of production and warehouse space, one new bottling line and an off-site warehouse. The company is still renovating its front office space, one of the final pieces of the project.

The new bottling line adds the capacity for clean-label beverages, which owner [Peter Caruso](#) said will help fuel growth.

"Clean label won't be just a fad," Caruso said. "People are realizing they need to start reading labels."

The new bottling line features state-of-the-art technology, including a custom tunnel pasteurizer made by Pro Engineering & Manufacturing in northwest Milwaukee. The pasteurizer allows Black Bear to produce sodas and juices without any chemical preservatives, because the pasteurization kills the germs.

The tunnel pasteurizer doubles as a bottle warmer for products that don't need pasteurization, said [Jim Jerschefske](#), a spokesman for Pro Engineering.

Black Bear, which has existed since the 1920s, has added about 40 employees in the last three years, growing to 60 employees, as the company grew sales from 750,000 cases per year in 2010 to more than 4.5 million in 2015. Caruso said he projects 2016 sales will reach 6 million cases.

With the third bottling line and the ability to produce clean label products, Black Bear has potential for accelerated growth. Currently the company operates five days a week in two shifts, so the current facility has room for increased efficiency and scaling up, Caruso said. The rising popularity of craft soda will also provide more opportunities for the family-owned company.

Black Bear bottles for brands such as PepsiCo., Target's private label Market Pantry and Sunny-D, along with several Wisconsin microbreweries' craft soda lines.



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