

# NICE PACKAGE

The U.S. lags far behind other countries in recycling #1 plastic. A local company hopes to fix that.

BY JENNIFER NICOLE SULLIVAN

"Have you seen 'The Graduate'?" It's a question that Michael Brown, owner of Packaging 2.0 in Providence, is often asked — so much so that he incorporates the film's scene in question in his presentations.

"Just one word..." an older man says to a young Dustin Hoffman at his graduation party: "Plastics."

"Exactly how do you mean?"

"There's a great future in plastics. Think about it."

And it's true. Decades after the 1967 film, companies like Packaging 2.0 are developing new eco-friendlier plastics for a brighter future. It's the only company in the Northeast producing 100 percent post-consumer recycled packaging (translation: they make packaging entirely from recycled plastic).

Brown grew up in the plastics industry and eventually helped run Crystal Thermoplastics in Cumberland, founded in 1959 by his late father, Robert, and late uncle Edmund. After years of producing plastic the old-fashioned way, the 54-year-old sailing enthusiast started Packaging 2.0 in 2003 to help make a difference in the environment, while keeping costs the same for consumers.

"You see all this stuff in the oceans and it's pretty heartbreaking," said Brown, who spent the early 80s printing T-shirts and sailing in St. Thomas before diving into plastics. "It makes you question your values and what you're doing."

If you've purchased food in a local

Whole Foods lately, you might have used one of Brown's "number 1 package" brand clear clamshell containers made of 100 percent post-consumer recycled PETE, plastic (polyethylene terephthalate marked with #1). Other Rhode Island eateries carry them, too, including Nikolas Pizza in Newport and Cory's Kitchen at Sweet Berry Farms in Middletown (Toppa's Foodservice & Paper Supply in Middletown and Perkins in Taunton, Mass., distribute them in the state.)

These recycled clamshells earned Packaging 2.0 the "Innovation" Responsible Packaging Award for 2012 from the Sustainable Food Trade Association. As part of the submission, a third-party auditing firm confirmed the clamshells' recycled-content claim and verified it safe.

But the key to its sustainability is, after you use the packaging, you must recycle it.

Every year, the U.S. recycles only 30 percent of about 5 billion pounds of PETE bottles produced each year. The rates are 60 percent and as high as 80 percent in Europe and other parts of the world, says Brown.

"We're stuck at 30 percent and it's a shame," said the Jamestown resident. "We're only capturing 1.5 billion pounds a year."

Brown's overall goal is to have a closed-loop system to keep plastic out of landfills and oceans — you use the container, recycle it and Packaging 2.0 (or other comparable companies) use the

plastic to make more containers.

Last year, Brown witnessed the effects of plastic in the oceans. In May 2012, he joined the 5 Gyres Institute ship voyage to study the western edge of the Great Pacific Garbage Patch (or Pacific Trash Vortex) located in the middle of the North Pacific gyre (a giant rotating ocean current). Some say it's about the size of Texas.

During the 19-day excursion from the Marshall Islands to Tokyo, the team dragged fine mesh nets to collect samples from the area.

"I guess I expected to see an island out there of trash," Brown said. "The fragments of broken bits of plastic number roughly close to a million fragments per square mile... You probably wouldn't notice it unless you were looking for it... People see litter, but they don't see these tiny fragments and granular pollution of broken up plastic which is a real problem for wildlife and fish."

In a recent study of 67 dead northern fulmars that washed up on the northwestern coasts of U.S. and Canada, researchers from The University of British Columbia's Department of Zoology found that 92.5 percent of them had plastic in their stomachs, such as twine, wrappers and Styrofoam. Each seabird contained an average of 36.8 pieces of plastic, according to the study in Marine Pollution Bulletin.

These scary findings make it clear that something must be done. If Packaging 2.0 can make 100 percent recycled plastic, why can't everyone else? "We're a smaller, nimbler company," said Brown, who works with manufacturing partners in Leominster, Mass., and in other cities to produce the plastic (including other industrial recycled packaging like foam). He runs the business in The Box Office in downtown Providence, a building of office spaces constructed of 32 recycled shipping containers on the former Harris Lumber site.

This year, Brown hopes to debut hot food plastic containers made of 100% recycled #2 HDPE (high-density polyethylene) plastic — think milk jugs and laundry detergent — that can withstand higher temperatures. But his long-term goal is to see recycling rates in the U.S. double.

"I'd love to see it get to 60 percent. I'd like to see us get to 100 percent, but I don't think I'll live that long," he said. "But we could double it! We could do it through a combination of legislation, technology and just habit changing."



Packaging 2.0's recycled hinged deli containers are made of recycled plastic bottles. CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

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'We're a smaller, nimbler company.' Fifty Whole Foods from Maine to New York now carry Packaging 2.0's 100 percent recycled post-consumer content PETE clamshell containers. The company is owned by Jamestown resident Michael Brown, shown at the Garden City Whole Foods in Cranston. PHOTO BY MICHAEL SALERNO