

Curious City

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So, what's (still) made in the Chicago area?

Chi-town manufacturing hasn't disappeared, you just have to know where to look for it.

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Dozens of you have started our Curious City excursions with [great questions](#). Some of those questions were [subtle](#). Others were, um, [less so](#). But few of these questions had an answer turn so much on one word.

Jessica Chronister of Chicago's Logan Square neighborhood asked, "What's still being manufactured in Chicago in terms of factory-made items?"

We didn't notice how one word — "*still*" — could be taken, at least not until it popped up during an interview.

curiouscity.

Curious City is a new-gathering experiment designed to satisfy your curiosities. [You ask your questions about Chicago, the region and the people who live here, vote for your favorites, and together we discover answers.](#) It's your Curious City.

"Well, it's interesting how you framed the question 'What's *still* being manufactured in the Chicago region,'" said Garrett Ballard-Rosa, a policy analyst at the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. "Manufacturing's never left the Chicago region."

Many of us may have assumed that Chicago's evolved out of the industrial age. But then, there's counterevidence: The South Side's Ford plant makes cars; mills in Gary, Indiana, churn out steel; and one factory makes a Chicago neighborhood [smell like chocolate brownies](#).

But these are operations you notice on your own, since they overwhelm your eyes or one of your other senses. (Again, just try forgetting a neighborhood that smells like brownies!)

There is, though, another side to the region's manufacturing profile. It's just not so easy to spot.

"Our manufacturing segment is composed of a lot of small and

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medium size manufacturers,” Ballard-Rosa said.

Ballard-Rosa explained how we stack up; Chicago, he said, is the second-largest manufacturing center in the nation, behind Los Angeles. And, unlike cities such as Detroit and Seattle — where

one specific industry makes up more than half of the manufacturing scene — our manufacturers are diverse: We make Lava lamps, lollipops, leather, plastics, martial arts uniforms, trophies, etc.

That is, we make all sorts of things.

But Jessica and I put a face on this smaller side of manufacturing. We started small and then got a little bigger.

First stop: West Side granola

The Milk and Honey brand of granola is made at a West Side industrial kitchen that’s infused with the smell of honey and oats. Owners Carol Watson and Karen Skrainy gave me and producer Logan Jaffe the opportunity to see the making of flavors like Pumpkin Spice, Blueberry Pecan Mix and Rick Bayless’s Mexican Mix.

“It’s not a fancy, highly automated procedure whatsoever,” Skrainy told me. “We do it just like you would at home. In standard-sized sheet pans we mix all the ingredients by hand, bake them in hand, stir them by hand.”

The kitchen is big for Milk and Honey’s 10 workers, but Skrainy and Watson said they hope to expand without having to move locations again. On average, they churn out 330 bags of granola each day.

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Watson started the granola business out of the kitchen of her cafe, which bears the same name. They sold enough of the crunchy stuff that they had to grow into a new location. And more growth turned into yet another move.

Interestingly, Watson doubts expansion will lead them to turn this “mostly by hand” process into an automated one. Instead, she said, they’re likely to just add more hands.

Watson said though they’re small, they can also pull off a national contract with Whole Foods. Milk and Honey’s location helps with that.

“Chicago is centrally located for shipping because if we were on the East Coast or the West Coast. So it works out well for us,” she said.

Coffee (grinders) for the world

Location is key for another small manufacturer that Jessica and I visited together: a midsize firm called Modern Process Equipment, located in Chicago’s Little Village neighborhood.

If you drink Intelligentsia coffee, or if you ever drank Turkish coffee while in the Middle East, there’s a good chance those coffee beans were ground by an MPE grinder.

Company president Dan Ephraim said MPE ships between 30 and 35 percent of its product overseas.

“We’re the largest coffee grinder manufacturer in the world,” he said. “In the United States, we produce over 90 percent of the coffee grinders for industrial and commercial applications.”

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MPE employs about 100 workers, several of which were on hand to demonstrate their skills to Jessica and me. At one point, we passed by people who operate machines that cut metal with high-pressure streams of water. Others assembled or tested coffee grinding machines that are large enough to put your home or office version to shame.

Unlike the manually-driven processes at Milk and Honey, automation is key at MPE. At one point, we were introduced to a machine that uses lasers to count coffee grounds.

Ephraim and his brother bought the company 30 years ago. Back then the firm concentrated on reconditioning grinders. But the brothers innovated.

“Pretty much all our machines are computer-operated,” Ephraim said. “Anything that is accurate or repetitive, we try to computerize it.”

The future is lean, small

Innovation is something that experts at CMAP mentioned several times, and it's a point that addresses a myth that Chicago no longer manufactures much.

CMAP's Simone Weil said we make lots of stuff, but automation *has* thinned our manufacturing workforce.

“The flip side of that though and the kind of positive shift that we're seeing the work force, since you need fewer people, they need higher skills,” she said.

CMAP says the region lost manufacturing jobs between 2000 and 2010, but automation wasn't the only cause.

Weil says we sent manufacturing jobs overseas, and some employers turned full-time employees into part-timers. But she says we've recovered a bit, by adding 20,000 manufacturing jobs over the past few years.

She said upping recruitment for these jobs is important in growing the more skilled manufacturing workforce.

Weil's colleague — Ballard Rosa — says innovation is Chicago's key to a sustainable manufacturing center.

“The number one thing the region needs to do is re-establish itself as a center of manufacturing research that leads to new commercial products and processes and efficiencies,” he said.

That would make our region more competitive, more vibrant and, maybe — when it comes to manufacturing, anyway — a little more noticeable.