Richard Hellmann was born to Hermann and Emma Palm Hellmann on June 22, 1876, in the German town of Vetschau, about 60 miles south of Berlin. He was educated at public schools until age 14, when he was apprenticed to a local market that sold a variety of goods, including groceries and liquor. After four years he moved on to other jobs—in Spreewald, Halle, Hamburg, and Bremerhaven—with most of his employment related to growing and packing vegetables and retailing and wholesaling food. When Hellmann saw an advertisement in a magazine for a job at Crosse & Blackwell, an important British grocery company that produced canned, dried, and bottled foods, he applied for the job and was selected. While in London, he spent much of his time working in the company’s kitchens; through this experience he gained valuable experience preparing and catering food. He also attended night school and engaged a tutor to teach him English. One of Hellmann’s colleagues at Crosse & Blackwell was “Matt” Martinez, a Frenchman, whose family owned a food manufacturing business in Paris that supplied hotels, clubs, and other establishments with fresh and prepared foods. Years later, Matt Martinez would play a role in Richard Hellmann’s career path.

While working at Crosse & Blackwell Hellmann met the president (most likely Pardon H. Bowen) of Goldberg, Bowen & Co., a fancy grocer in San Francisco. Bowen offered Hellmann a job, and the young man left Crosse & Blackwell and headed for the United States, arriving in New York City in October 1903. He planned to stay in New York only briefly before he caught a train to San Francisco. The Saturday that he disembarked, he explored the city. On Franklin St. in downtown Manhattan he saw a sign that read “Francis H. Leggett Co.” Leggett was a major American wholesale grocer, and its products had been distributed by Crosse & Blackwell in England. On a whim, Hellmann entered the building and fortuitously encountered the company’s vice president, John C. Juhring. The two hit it off, and Juhring offered Hellmann a job. The young man accepted, and over the next eighteen months he learned the ins and outs of American food retailing.

In August of 1904 Richard Hellmann married Margaret Vossberg, a woman he’d known in Germany; she was the daughter of a delicatessen owner. The Hellmanns lived on West 78th Street, and on weekdays Hellmann walked up Columbus Avenue to the 81st Street Elevated train entrance on his way to work. One day in mid 1905 he noticed that the storefront at 490 Columbus Avenue, between 83rd and 84th Streets, formerly a tailor shop, was vacant. He rented the space, as well as three apartments in the back, and opened Hellmann’s Delicatessen. The couple worked day and night to make the store prosper, and it did. They eventually purchased the building and the one next door (492 Columbus Avenue). In 1906, Margaret gave birth to a girl, who was named after her mother.

Hellmann worked constantly to make the deli a success and the long hours finally caught up with
him. He became ill in 1911 and his doctor gave him a short time to live if he continued working at that pace. He sold the delicatessen to Charles Eberhardt, although Hellmann retained an interest in the business. In early 1912, the Hellmanns left New York and traveled to Germany, where they visited Vetschau, Richard’s birthplace. They also went to Paris, where Hellmann met his former colleague, Matt Martinez, who by then was president of his family’s retail food business. Hellmann studied Martinez’s operation and was particularly impressed with his distribution system: Rather then expect customers to come to buy the fruit, cheese, butter, vegetables, jams, and jellies he sold, Martinez delivered the food directly to his customers. One of the products that Martinez made and distributed was mayonnaise. The Hellmanns had made a fresh batch of mayonnaise by hand everyday and sold it in small portions at their delicatessen, but Martinez made mayonnaise in bulk and distributed it to hotels and other institutions. Although he was impressed with the concept, Hellmann was put off by the packaging: The mayonnaise was sold in five-pound wooden butter boxes, which to Hellmann seemed unsanitary.

While in Europe Richard Hellmann received a cable reporting that Charles Eberhardt had died, and he made immediate plans to return to New York. Travel agents encouraged them to sail on the Titanic’s maiden voyage, but the Hellmanns chose a smaller ship that was less expensive and would arrive in New York earlier. A few days after the family got home, they heard the news of the luxury liner’s fate.

The Hellmanns resumed running their delicatessen. When asked to supply a quantity of mayonnaise for a party, Richard Hellmann remembered Martinez’s operation and he began to read everything he could find about mayonnaise. There were several problems that needed to be overcome if he were to succeed in wholesaling mayonnaise: There were many different recipes and formulae for making it, and even using the same ingredients under different conditions produced a different flavor. Freshly made mayonnaise, because it contains raw eggs, doesn’t keep well. When the deli was closed, Hellmann experimented with making mayonnaise in the back room. He finally perfected his own recipe, using raw egg yolks, vegetable oil, vinegar, and small amounts of salt, sugar and seasoning. He offered this to his customers who told others and his sales grew.

When Hellmann arrived at a formula he liked, he turned his attention to packaging. Rather than using wooden boxes, he packed the mayonnaise in one-gallon stone jars. Hellmann found few takers when he offered the mayonnaise to buyers at the city’s hotels and selling mayonnaise in this way was promptly discontinued. His customers at the delicatessen, however, liked his mayonnaise and they were willing to buy small quantities of it. He would make a batch in the morning, pack it in small jars, and regularly sell out by nightfall. This started Hellmann thinking—why wouldn’t customers in other delis and grocery stores also want the same product?

On September 1, 1912 he began selling bottled mayonnaise; on the label was with three blue ribbons. Why “Blue Ribbons”? Hellmann just says “A proper package with label was designed”. At the time, blue ribbons were awarded first place in competitions at state fairs and in normal conversation the term meant “outstanding quality.” Many other products, such as beer, dried peaches and ketchup, were branded as “blue ribbon” products.
Sales were good enough that he applied for a trademark on the ribbon image in November 1913. Unlike the small, narrow-mouthed bottles used by E. R. Durkee & Co., his main competition, for their Salad Dressing, Hellmann used wide-mouthed jars. Hellmann’s jars were also larger, and his price was lower. And because it was easier to get a big spoon into the jar, customers used more of it, and were willing to buy more.

Another crucial decision that Hellmann made was to distribute bottled mayonnaise the way Matt Martinez did—by trucking them directly to retailers. He had “Hellmann’s Mayonnaise” painted on the side of a truck in big red letters, then hired a driver and a salesman. They picked up the mayonnaise in the morning and distributed it to grocers, restaurants, and delicatessens throughout the day.

Retailers were required to pay up front, which was unusual at the time, but this eliminated a major bookkeeping problem for Hellmann and kept cash flow smooth in the early years. Hellmann salesmen returned a week later to each retailer to retrieve any unsold product. This guarantee encouraged retailers to stock up, but it was also important because Hellmann was not sure how long the mayonnaise would keep. Other than a little salt, it contained no preservatives, and refrigeration was not common in either grocery stores or homes at the time.

In May of 1914 Hellmann updated his packaging. He trademarked the brand name “Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise” and adopted a new design featuring a simple blue ribbon bow. It was initially sold in two sizes (3 ½ ounce and 8 ½ ounce) in standard screw-top canning jars. This was later expanded to four sizes ----small, medium, pints, and quarts. These glass bottles could be reused when empty by placing a new rubber ring under the metal lid. In a brilliant promotional move, Hellmann sold those rings for a penny apiece: Customers were pleased with the reusable jars, and the trademark on the metal lid was a constant reminder to buy Hellmann’s Mayonnaise.

As sales increased, distributors with their own vehicles were hired; they received a salary and commissions. Each distributor controlled a specific area of New York City; later, distributors were assigned territories in other cities and rural regions. Hellmann’s distribution system worked. Sales soon outstripped his ability to produce mayonnaise in the back of the store. He sold the delicatessen in 1914 and opened a manufacturing facility at 120 Lawrence Street, in downtown Manhattan. He soon outgrew this space, and in 1915 he moved the operation to 495 Steinway Street, in Long Island City. In February 1916, the company was incorporated in New York as Richard Hellmann, Inc.

Hellmann tested the market with other European-style products, such as pumpernickel bread and horseradish, but these proved unsuccessful and were discontinued. He then turned his attention to distributing mayonnaise outside of New York City. For nearby customers, the product was shipped by truck or rail from the Steinway Street plant. For more distant customers, the company needed to expand their production beyond the east coast. In Chicago, he licensed John Behrmann, a German immigrant, to manufacture and distribute Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise. Behrmann began making small quantities in November 1919. Sales were good, and Behrmann constructed a modern factory at 4550 West Jackson Blvd. in Chicago. The company built a factory in San Francisco in 1922.
Hellmann’s was not the only commercial mayonnaise on the market—many other companies made and distributed the condiment as well. In 1920 the Tribune Institute, a subsidiary of the New York Tribune, asked three French chefs in New York to taste and compare common salad dressing brands. The Institute also sent the dressings to a chemist for examination. Two of the three judges selected Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise as the best (the other judged it second-best). They found that Hellmann’s was the “richest.” (The chemist reported that Hellmann’s mayonnaise consisted of 84 percent oil—more than any dressing tested.).

As sales of Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon mayonnaise soared, Hellmann began construction on a five-story factory at 34-08 Northern Boulevard in Long Island City in 1922. When it was completed, it was “the largest mayonnaise factory in the world.” It incorporated the latest and best machinery, and the most efficient means of producing mayonnaise. At the height of the mayonnaise season in July the factory used 1½ train “carloads of edible oils and approximately three carloads of glass jars” every day. By 1927, the company owned 600 trucks that daily transported boxes filled with mayonnaise jars from distribution centers to retailers. Plants were eventually established in Atlanta, and Tampa Bay, Florida, and distribution centers were opened in Dallas, Texas, and Toronto, Canada.

Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise dominated the mayonnaise market in part because the company was better at advertising than its competitors. The company placed advertisements in newspapers beginning in 1917 and in magazines in the 1920s. In 1922 Behrmann needed something more and he published a small cookbooklet, titled The Chef’s Standby; Blue Ribbon Recipes. It included recipes for Asparagus Salad, Pineapple Isle Salad, Flower Fruit Salad, Tomato Baskets with Various Fillings, Crab Meat Salad, Salmon or Tuna Fish Salad, Artichokes with Richard Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise Sauces, Stuffed Celery, Chicken Salad, Sweetbread and Mushroom Salad, Egg Sandwich, Stuffed Olives Sandwich, Nut Sandwiches, Blue Ribbon Club Sandwich, Mushroom Sandwich, Thousand Island Dressing, Roquefort Cheese Dressing, and Meat Sauces. All recipes included Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise as an ingredient. This pamphlet was judged a good marketing success and the company would later publish more such booklets.

By the mid-1920s, there were an estimated 600 manufacturers of mayonnaise in the United States. In 1925 forty of the largest manufacturers formed the Mayonnaise Products Manufacturers Association of America, headquartered in Philadelphia. Richard Hellmann was elected chairman of the board of the association.

Throughout the early years, Hellmann continued to improve the product, acquire new machinery, and make his manufacturing and distribution operation more efficient. He sought out the best talent to assist in making a consistently good product. For instance, he hired Thomas Marion Rector, a professional chemist, who converted a milk homogenizer machine into one that emulsified mayonnaise continuously. He also reduced loss due to spoilage by improving manufacturing methods and by using salted egg yolk. By the end of the 1920s, the company was producing three tons of mayonnaise per hour. These and other changes reduced costs and created a better quality product with a consistent taste and texture and a longer shelf life. Richard Hellmann, Inc., became extremely profitable. In 1924 the company generated net profits
$513,743; the following year it netted $539,346.\textsuperscript{34}

Beginning in 1925 Hellmann began publishing cookbooklets, such as Richard Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise. It went through several versions, some with clocks on the cover; others with calendars.\textsuperscript{35}

In less than 15 years Richard Hellmann, a small delicatessen owner, developed a formula for mayonnaise that could be commercially wholesaled. He then created a manufacturing and distribution empire that spanned the American continent, and in process he created an industry that had not existed when he started on his venture in 1912. By 1927, Richard Hellmann, Inc. was generating sales of $15 million with a net profit of $1 million.\textsuperscript{36} In 1927 Richard Hellmann, Inc. was sold to Postum Foods, later renamed General Foods.

Best Food

In the mid-1920s, the Postum Cereal Company (later to become General Foods) went on a buying spree, acquiring many smaller food companies. In August 1927 Postum bought Richard Hellmann, Inc., makers of mayonnaise.\textsuperscript{37} The main reason for these acquisitions, as stated in Postum’s 1929 Annual Report, was to create a more efficient single sales force selling many kinds of food, rather than just a single product, such as mayonnaise. Under General Foods’ control, the Richard Hellmann brand was expanded to include a number of products, including horseradish. Hellmann’s mayonnaise was advertised in national magazines and newspapers, and General Foods issued cookbooklets, such as Correct Salads for All Occasions (1931), promoting the mayonnaise.\textsuperscript{38} In 1929, General Foods redesigned the label, moving from a circular image to a large oval with “Hellmann’s Mayonnaise” in a rectangle inside. In January 1932, General Foods folded the Hellmann brand into Best Foods, Inc.

Best Foods, Inc., started as a subsidiary of the Nucoa Butter Company. In 1917, Nucoa was acquired by the American Linseed Company (maker of linseed oil from flax), which was incorporated in New Jersey in 1898. During the 1920s, Best Foods acquired the Gold Medal Mayonnaise Company of Yonkers, New York, in business since 1922.\textsuperscript{39} Best Foods began advertising its mayonnaise in 1924,\textsuperscript{40} the company also sold Relish Spread, Thousand Island Dressing, and several other food products. In 1927 the American Linseed Company was acquired by the Gold Dust Corporation, maker of soap, shoe polish, and flour. Gold Dust maintained Best Foods as a separate subsidiary.

Beginning in 1927, Best Foods published a cookbooklet called The Salad Bowl, featuring recipes made with its mayonnaise, relish, or salad dressing. The booklet also gave suggestions for using mayonnaise in sandwiches.\textsuperscript{41} By 1931, Hellmann’s Blue Ribbon was the largest selling mayonnaise; it was manufactured in six plants. Gold Medal Mayonnaise was second in terms of sales, and was manufactured in five plants.\textsuperscript{42} In January 1932 Gold Dust and General Foods merged Hellmann’s and Best Foods divisions. Best Foods, which sold many other products, was the larger operation; General Foods acquired 29 percent of the joint venture, which was named Best Foods, Inc. The former vice president and marketing director of Best Foods became the president of the merged company, which was divided into three territories: west of the Rocky
Mountains, east of the Rockies, and Canada. A Best Foods salesman became responsible for the merged company on the West Coast, and he converted the Hellmann factory in San Francisco to manufacture "Best Food Mayonnaise." On the East Coast and in Canada, Hellmann’s salesmen were placed in charge, and in these locations, Hellmann’s replaced Gold Medal Mayonnaise. The formula for both products was the same.

The Benton & Bowles advertising firm in New York handled promotion for the merged company. Best Foods continued to publish many cookbooklets promoting both Best Foods Mayonnaise and Hellmann’s Mayonnaise. 43

The Depression, which began in 1929 and continued for more than a decade, didn’t hurt mayonnaise sales: Even with lower food budgets, housewives could still feed their families on sandwiches. The production of mayonnaise increased to meet demand; Best Foods built a new factory in Bayonne, New Jersey, in 1934. In November 1936 Gold Dust combined three of its soap, shoe polish, and other subsidiaries into a single corporation, now named Hecker Products Corp. Hecker later sold its soap and other businesses, but it kept its subsidiary Best Foods.

In 1937 Best Foods put out a booklet called Cakes and Cookies with Personality: Exciting New Recipes for Cakes, Cookies and Frostings. It included a recipe for Chocolate Mayonnaise Cake, developed by Mrs. Paul Price, wife of a Hellmann’s sales distributor. The recipe has become an American classic. 44 When Hellmann’s mayonnaise celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1987, Nick Malgieri, the director of baking at the school, made the 6-foot tall cake in the shape of a jar of mayonnaise and was so delighted with the recipe that he included a version of it in his book, Chocolate (1998). 45

While Best Foods sold other food products, the mayonnaise became its most profitable item. In 1942, Hecker bought General Foods’ 29 percent share for $5.5 million and the corporate name was changed to Best Foods, Inc. In the mid-1950s the company decided to focus only on consumer products, where the profit margins were greater. In 1966 Best Foods spent $30 million on advertising. Print ads appeared in national magazines including Good Housekeeping, Ladies’ Home Journal, and Sunset, and regional editions of many other magazines. Helen McCully, food editor of McCall’s Magazine, wrote a cookbooklet, The French Have a Word for It: Mayonnaise: Recipes from Some of the World’s Greatest Chefs and the Kitchens of Best Foods, which glamorized Best Foods/Hellmann’s Mayonnaise. It was first published in 1967 and reprinted in subsequent years. 46

In 1959 Best Foods, Inc., merged with Corn Products Refining Company (makers of Mazola Oil, Karo Syrup, and Argo Corn Starch) to form the Corn Products Company. In April 1969 the company changed its name to CPC International, Inc. in a move aimed to deemphasize its corn-refining operations, which became increasingly less important over the decades.

Hellmann’s Mayonnaise had been sold in Canada since the 1920s; beginning in the 1970s, CPC International began distributing cookbooklets in Canada promoting its mayonnaise in both English and French. 47 In the early 1960s, CPC began to advertise Hellmann’s Mayonnaise in Europe. It was introduced into Portugal, Spain, Brazil, Argentina, and Colombia in the 1970s.
Beginning in the 1980s, Hellmann’s mayonnaise cookbooklets were published in the United Kingdom and France.48

Best Foods also began to extend their product lines in the 1960s and 1970s. In 1960s the company introduced Hellmann’s Spin Blend, a mayonnaise-like product with “one third less oil than leading salad dressing,” according to their advertisements. Hellmann’s Light was added in 1987, and a cholesterol-free version followed. The main advertising slogan during this period was “Bring out the Hellmann’s and bring out the best.”

On December 31, 1997 Corn Products International, Inc. was spun off and the following day, CPC International changed its name to Bestfoods. It was acquired by Unilever Global in 2000. Recently, Unilever has released several value-added versions, such as Mayonnaise Dressing with Extra Virgin Olive Oil. It has also promoted Hellmann’s Mayonnaise through several creative promotional campaigns. In 2008 Unilever partnered with the celebrity chef Bobby Flay in “Build the Perfect Sandwich” and an online show, “Real Food Summer School,” which were designed to help raise awareness of the many possible uses for mayonnaise in sandwiches.49 In June 2012, Hellmann’s was a sponsor’s of the 30th Annual FOOD & WINE Classic, that took place in Aspen.

Postscripts

On July 29, 1920, Richard Hellmann became an American citizen; in the same year, his wife Margaret died. Two years later, he married Nina Maxwell. They had a residence on Burlingame Avenue in San Mateo, California, which they owned until 1937. From 1925 on they also had a home at the Willow Court Apartments in Flushing, New York.50 They had four children: Robert, Raymond, Carol, and June.

With the funds Hellmann received for the sale of his company, he began construction on a summer home he called Bobrae Mountain Lodge (a combination of his sons’ first names) in Boiceville, New York (today it is run as a bed-and-breakfast lodge called Onteora Mountain House).51 In 1929, he launched the Richard Hellmann Foundation in America and Die Hellmann-Stiftung in Vetschau, Germany, which supported educational projects and built and reconstructed several buildings during the 1930s.52 Hellmann served on the board of General Foods for several years, and engaged in a variety of other business activities, including banking, land development, and food manufacturing. He moved to Park Drive South in Rye, New York, in 1954. Richard Hellmann died in a nursing home in Greenwich, Connecticut, on February 2, 1971.

Endnotes


3. Hellmann, 16.

4. Hellmann, 4-6.


11. Hellmann continued to experiment and improve the formula and the process for the next 15 years. He added ingredients, perhaps more salt, to help preserve the mayonnaise longer for in 1922 the company claimed that on the mayonnaise jar label that it was “fresh and good indefinitely if kept cool but not cold.” See also: “Rise of Richard Hellmann, Inc. Reads Like a Romance,” *Wholesale Grocery Review* 28 (*** 1927): 70.


14 In French, of course, Cordon Bleu means an excellent chef.


24 Other one time mayonnaise manufacturers include the Pompeian Olive Oil Company in Baltimore; Bee Brand Mayonnaise, made by McCormick Co., Baltimore; Ivanhoe Mayonnaise, made by C.G. Meaker Co., in Auburn, New York.


29 *The Chef’s Standby; Blue Ribbon Salads* (Chicago: John Behrmann, 1922), np.


33. Hellmann, 15.


43. *Recipes: Richard Hellmann's Blue Ribbon Mayonnaise* ([Long Island City, N.Y.: Richard Hellmann, 1932];


51. Hellmann, 20; they retained ownership of Bobrae until 1945.