

Zatarains, Inc. v. Oak Grove Smokehouse, Inc.

698 F.2d 786, 792-93 (5th Cir. 1983)

{Plaintiff Zatarains, Inc. (“Zatarain’s”) used two registered trademarks: FISH-FRI for fried-fish batter and CHICK-FRI for fried chicken batter. Competitors, including Oak Grove Smokehouse, Inc. (“Oak Grove”) and Visko’s Fish Fry, Inc. (“Visco’s”), used phrases like “FISH FRY” or “CHICKEN FRY” on the packaging of competing products to describe the contents of those products. Both sides of the dispute cross-appealed the outcome of the district court’s bench trial.}

Goldberg, Circuit Judge:

....

Throughout this litigation, Zatarain’s has maintained that the term “Fish-Fri” is a suggestive mark automatically protected from infringing uses by virtue of its registration in 1962. Oak Grove and Visko’s assert that “fish fry” is a generic term identifying a class of foodstuffs used to fry fish; alternatively, Oak Grove and Visko’s argue that “fish fry” is merely descriptive of the characteristics of the product. The district court found that “Fish-Fri” was a descriptive term identifying a function of the product being sold. Having reviewed this finding under the appropriate “clearly erroneous” standard, we affirm.

We are mindful that “[t]he concept of descriptiveness must be construed rather broadly.” Callman § 70.2. Whenever a word or phrase conveys an immediate idea of the qualities, characteristics, effect, purpose, or ingredients of a product or service, it is classified as descriptive and cannot be claimed as an exclusive trademark. *Id.* § 71.1; see *Stix Products, Inc. v. United Merchants & Manufacturers, Inc.*, 295 F.Supp. 479, 488 (S.D.N.Y. 1968). Courts and commentators have formulated a number of tests to be used in classifying a mark as descriptive.

A suitable starting place is the dictionary, for “[t]he dictionary definition of the word is an appropriate and relevant indication ‘of the ordinary significance and meaning of words’ to the public.” *American Heritage Life Insurance Co. v. Heritage Life Insurance Co.*, 494 F.2d 3, 11 n.5 (5th Cir. 1974). Webster’s Third New International Dictionary 858 (1966) lists the following definitions for the term “fish fry”: “1. a picnic at which fish are caught, fried, and eaten; . . . 2. fried fish.” Thus, the basic dictionary definitions of the term refer to the preparation and consumption of fried fish. This is at least preliminary evidence that the term “Fish-Fri” is descriptive of Zatarain’s product in the sense that the words naturally direct attention to the purpose or function of the product.

The “imagination test” is a second standard used by the courts to identify descriptive terms. This test seeks to measure the relationship between the actual words of the mark and the product to which they are applied. If a term “requires imagination, thought and perception to reach a conclusion as to the nature of

goods,” *Stix Products*, 295 F.Supp. at 488, it is considered a suggestive term. Alternatively, a term is descriptive if standing alone it conveys information as to the characteristics of the product. In this case, mere observation compels the conclusion that a product branded “Fish-Fri” is a prepackaged coating or batter mix applied to fish prior to cooking. The connection between this merchandise and its identifying terminology is so close and direct that even a consumer unfamiliar with the product would doubtless have an idea of its purpose or function. It simply does not require an exercise of the imagination to deduce that “Fish-Fri” is used to fry fish. Accordingly, the term “Fish-Fri” must be considered descriptive when examined under the “imagination test.”

A third test used by courts and commentators to classify descriptive marks is “whether competitors would be likely to need the terms used in the trademark in describing their products.” *Union Carbide Corp. v. Ever-Ready, Inc.*, 531 F.2d 366, 379 (7th Cir. 1976). A descriptive term generally relates so closely and directly to a product or service that other merchants marketing similar goods would find the term useful in identifying their own goods. Common sense indicates that in this case merchants other than Zatarain’s might find the term “fish fry” useful in describing their own particular batter mixes. While Zatarain’s has argued strenuously that Visko’s and Oak Grove could have chosen from dozens of other possible terms in naming their coating mix, we find this position to be without merit. As this court has held, the fact that a term is not the only or even the most common name for a product is not determinative, for there is no legal foundation that a product can be described in only one fashion. There are many edible fish in the sea, and as many ways to prepare them as there are varieties to be prepared. Even piscatorial gastronomes would agree, however, that frying is a form of preparation accepted virtually around the world, at restaurants starred and unstarred. The paucity of synonyms for the words “fish” and “fry” suggests that a merchant whose batter mix is specially spiced for frying fish is likely to find “fish fry” a useful term for describing his product.

A final barometer of the descriptiveness of a particular term examines the extent to which a term actually has been used by others marketing a similar service or product. This final test is closely related to the question whether competitors are likely to find a mark useful in describing their products. As noted above, a number of companies other than Zatarain’s have chosen the word combination “fish fry” to identify their batter mixes. Arnaud’s product, “Oyster Shrimp and Fish Fry,” has been in competition with Zatarain’s “Fish-Fri” for some ten to twenty years. When companies from A to Z, from Arnaud to Zatarain’s, select the same term to describe their similar products, the term in question is most likely a descriptive one.

The correct categorization of a given term is a factual issue; consequently, we review the district court’s findings under the “clearly erroneous” standard of Fed.R.Civ.P. 52. The district court in this case found that Zatarain’s trademark

“Fish-Fri” was descriptive of the function of the product being sold. Having applied the four prevailing tests of descriptiveness to the term “Fish-Fri,” we are convinced that the district court’s judgment in this matter is not only not clearly erroneous, but clearly correct.

{In a footnote, the court considered and rejected the argument that FISH-FRI was generic as to fish-frying batter. The court also affirmed the district court’s finding that CHICK-FRI was descriptive.}