

Parents need not worry if their progeny hang out at this night club. See Page 3B

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Eugene, a city located about 1,000 miles north of the Mexican / American border, sports not one, but three local fresh salsa producers.

This isn't the watery, sometimes bitter-tasting sauce that sits indefinitely in jars on the store shelf.

Nor is it the spicy complimentary sauce served with tortilla chips at local bars and Mexican food restaurants.

This is fresh, thick, chunky salsa — with real tomatoes, onions, spices and no preservatives — sold in the refrigerated deli-section of health food stores and independent grocery stores.

Ask any of the three local salsa manufacturers and they'll tell you that there is no comparison between commercially made salsa and the hot stuff they whip up, package and deliver themselves.

"It's just as good as right out of the garden," says Becky Paxton, owner and operator of Salsa De Casa, the first fresh salsa in the area.

Paxton, who has made and marketed the salsa for the last two years, bought the business from a friend who got the recipe from a "Mexican grandmother."

Up until just a few weeks ago, Paxton made the salsa at home in her kitchen. She used to hand-chop the vegetables, mix the sauce up (the fresh stuff is not cooked) and deliver the sauce to stores the same day since she had no refrigeration facilities. Now she makes the sauce two days a week at the Emerald Valley Kitchen in Springfield, uses a food processor to dice the vegetables to the right chunkiness and stores the product in the walk-in refrigerators there for distributors to pick up and deliver all over the state.

Dean Miller, owner of Dean's Famous Salsa, started mixing up his salsa at home for himself, experimenting with different ingredients and combinations he picked up through people he met in his extensive travels through Mexico.

"In Mexico, each family has and makes their own salsa," Miller says. "I had literally hundreds of types of salsa."

When friends started asking for containers of his special recipe, Miller decided to market the salsa, first from his home, then, since about a year ago, from a small kitchen and office near East 17th Avenue and Pearl Street.

An important ingredient in Dean's Salsa is the pickled jalapeno peppers, which Miller says is more authentically Mexican than using fresh peppers.

"In Mexico, every store has a jar of pickled jalapenos. Most people (in Mexico) use the pickled ones," he says.

But Jan Zimmermann, manufacturer of Jan's Original Hot Sauce, insists on putting fresh jalapenos in his sauce, calling them the "nucleus" of his salsa.

Zimmermann says his salsa has "evolved" over the 1½ years since he first started marketing it from his home. "I made it just for the table," he says, adding that the recipe is a little different each time he makes the salsa, which gives "character" to the product.

"I don't like to taste the same thing every time," he says.

Like the other salsa makers, Zimmermann started selling his hot sauce in local health food stores, which he says were very receptive to his product.

"Every store I went into I was picked up," he says.

Now the three fresh salsas from Eugene are shipped around the state and, in the case of Jan's Salsa, to Washington, Idaho and Alaska.

Fresh cilantro, a flavorful parsley-like vegetable, tomato paste or puree, and fresh tomatoes and onions are some other key ingredients in fresh salsas.

Though their recipes may differ, all three salsa-makers agree they are hooked on the hot stuff.

"Once you're addicted to salsa, nothing is good without it," says Miller, who puts it on eggs, in cottage cheese and with fish.

A natural-foods enthusiast, Zimmermann enjoys his hot sauce poured over tofu and rice cake.

One customer said Salsa De Casa tasted great with ice cream, Paxton relates with a grimace.

With the absence of preservatives, the refrigerator shelf life for fresh salsa ranges from two weeks for Salsa De Casa to five weeks for Jan's Salsa. Zimmermann says the vinegar he puts in his sauce acts as a natural preservative.

IT'S THE HOTTEST STUFF IN EUGENE!



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