

2-decade-old popcorn biz makes fresh start

By ERIC A. HOWALD
Of the Keizertimes

Jerry Crane, owner of Suzy Q Kettle Corn, measures popcorn in terms of how many bags it takes a customer to get someone through a movie.

“Our 10 ounce bag should get you through a movie,” said Crane.

The limited-edition, jumbo-sized bags reserved for special events will get two families through a single movie. The number varies depending on the appetites of those involved.

Crane recently purchased Suzy Q popcorn from its former owner in Bend and moved the production to a warehouse space on Candlewood Avenue in Keizer. It’s not hard to find, just follow your nose.

“We’ve had neighborhood people walk from two or three blocks over, just by following the smell, and knock on the door to ask if they could buy some,” Crane said.

The scent is powerful, but it’s not nearly as overwhelming as it can be when mixed in with other traditional fair and carnival food. He would prefer that customers pick up a bag from one of the skyrocketing number of retailers who are putting the product on their shelves. Roth’s IGA stores are one option. Cost ranges between \$4 and \$5 depending on the retailer.

Crane had his eye on the business 15 years ago, but the opportunity to purchase it came along at a perfect time.

Crane also owns That Guy Catering, but business cratered with the onset of the pandemic.

“We lost about 90% percent of our revenue. It was especially tough because we’d been growing up to that point,” he said.

Crane was no stranger to confectionery



Jerry Crane III tends an industrial-strength popcorn kettle while David Maldonado makes quick work of the bagging process Suzy Q Kettle Corn in southeast Keizer. ERIC A. HOWALD of Keizertimes

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Owner, SUZY Q KETTLE CORN

cuisine, he’d managed concession sales at Volcanoes Stadium for many years. Transitioning to the popcorn business was relatively easy, in no small part thanks to Crane’s son, Jerry Crane III. The younger Jerry, Crane’s eldest of five kids, had worked alongside his dad for a while and even set new records in an entrepreneurship contest as a senior in high school at Willamette Valley Christian School – selling kettle corn. His son is one of the main cooks and a driving force behind developing new flavors. A snickerdoodle popcorn is in the offing but there are several others that sound equally mouthwatering.

What Crane didn’t expect was how the business would grow after the move. Before January, the previous owner was making about 1,000 bags of popcorn a week. They are now making 2,000 bags a

week and growing from four employees to eight.

“It’s exciting because we’ve seen the business double in three months, but it’s also been great to have people call us and ask how to get our product into their stores,” he said.

Taste is important, but Crane lauded another of his employees, David Maldonado, for fine-tuning the bagging process.

“He’s gotten it down to where the bags will stand up on the shelves and small things like that make a difference in our presentation,” Crane said.

Aside from premium ingredients and bagging tricks, fresh delivery is one of the keys to the business’s success. Another of Crane’s sons, Jude, helps with delivery to retailers. Crane said employees are

logging about 1,500 miles a week to meet the growing demand. Suzy Q will also ship anywhere in the country.

By getting products on the shelves in exactly the right numbers at the right times, it stays fresher than more mass-produced competitors.

“It also means there’s no preservatives that change the taste,” Crane said.

The explosive growth and opportunity for family as well as long-time employees to participate in the success are high points for Crane, but when it comes to reviews, there’s one individual who he holds above all others: the original Suzy Q.

“It’s great because you know she’s watching us and, every once in a while, she calls me and lets me know we’re doing a great job,” Crane said, punctuating it with a fist pump.

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