

A classic American concession was first fried in Oregon

The coastal roots of the corn dog

By MEAGAN CUTHILL
Oregon Public Broadcasting

You see them at festivals and fairs across the country. At sporting events. At concession stands for any occasion, really. They're an American classic — corn dogs. And it may surprise you that the beloved fried food on a stick was invented at the Oregon Coast.

Along U.S. Highway 101 in Rockaway Beach, an offbeat roadside attraction can't be missed. Drivers likely do a double take at the sight of a giant corn dog on the roof. It's a massive fiberglass corn dog. A Pronto Pup, to be exact.

"To my knowledge, the history of the Pronto Pup was created in Rockaway in the late 1930s, early '40s, a little closer to town," said Diane Langer, who bought the modern-day Original Pronto Pup with her husband in late 2021.

The birth of the Pronto Pup goes back to Labor Day 1939. It was on that day that George Boyington, who ran a hot dog stand in Rockaway Beach with his wife, had an idea as he sat with overstocked stale buns. What about a batter that could be cooked on demand?

Boyington determined a delicious, pronto solution. The new snack on a stick became a point of local pride.

The Original Pronto Pup first opened in 2016, as an homage to the culinary creation invented in town roughly eight decades earlier.



Photos by Arya Surowidjojo/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Diane Langer, the co-owner of The Original Pronto Pup, stands outside the Rockaway Beach business in April.

Taking Pronto Pups nationwide

Soon after Boyington nailed down the recipe, he started the mass production of the Pronto Pup batter mix out of Portland. The product soon gained nationwide attention. Boyington trademarked the brand name and began to franchise the business.

Today, Pronto Pups are especially popular in the Midwest. Gregg Karnis, owner of Minnesota's Pronto Pup franchise, has had a lifetime's worth of experience with Pronto Pups in that region of the country.

Karnis' father was a Marine who ended his service in 1944 in Portland. After leaving his ship in the city, the older Karnis heard about Pronto Pups and went on to become one of the first franchise owners, opening up a shop in Chicago.

"(The business) was an instant success. ... At that point in time, the whole concept of a batter-coated hot dog and a stick was literally sweeping the nation and people were buying product club franchises from coast to coast," Karnis said of his father's franchise.

The elder Karnis was then approached to bring Pronto Pups to the Minnesota State Fair in 1947. They've been a fair staple operated by the Karnis family ever since — and it is a full-blown operation.

"We've got a main commissary, which is nearly 3,500 square feet, where we simply do production. We have a retail end in front, like a storefront if you will. But the whole back of the building is production. ... The batter's mixed. It gets delivered to the locations. We have a total of eight locations on state fairgrounds."

Over the course of the Minnesota

State Fair, people buy a lot of Pronto Pups.

"On the average we go through about 36 tons of hot dogs in a 12-day state fair and usually, well over a hundred tons of batter we mix up. So, it's hundreds of thousands of pups that are served each year," said Karnis.

If those numbers don't prove Minnesota's love of Pronto Pups, state lawmakers officially recognized them in 2016.

"We got called down to the Minnesota state Legislature in St. Paul, the capital," for a resolution recognizing Pronto Pups' contribution to the Minnesota State Fair, Karnis said, remembering the occasion.

"And it was like the most probably heartfelt touching warmest moment of my entire life. Because at that point in time, I realized that, boy, what my mom and dad brought up to Minnesota is far more than I ever, ever imagined it to be."

While Minnesota has embraced the Pronto Pup for generations, the trademarked batter still all comes from Portland. And in Rockaway Beach, where The Original Pronto Pup location was named to honor the pup's local origins, there's also a strong following.

A corny tradition

A corn dog may seem like more of a lunch or dinner food. At The Original Pronto Pup, people are eager to place an order as soon as the doors unlock at 10 a.m.

"It's actually pretty amazing when you realize how big of a following Pronto Pups have, and when people come in and they say, 'We drove three hours to come and have a Pronto Pup.' Or, 'We came



Customers sit outside The Original Pronto Pup in Rockaway Beach, with one dipping a corn dog into a serving of mustard.

from Idaho.' Or, 'We came from Michigan,'" said Langer. "A lot of times they say, 'We waited for you to open today so we could come in.' And, 'We changed our route or our destination so that we could stop in.'"

There's also another type of fanfare that Pronto Pup enthusiasts can find in Rockaway Beach: the mechanical corn dog.

Like a mechanical bull or horse on a merry-go-round, the corn dog is outfit-

ted with a saddle. Popping in a couple of quarters to a slot makes the ride start. Those young and young at heart take the corn dog for a spin.

The Original Pronto Pup boasts a whole corny experience dedicated to the brainchild of Boyington's creation from all those years ago.

The process of making a pup is simple as it was back then.

"So, we mix the batter up each day by hand, everything needs to be on a stick in order for it to stay under the oil in the fryer. ... We put sticks in everything. Then everything is dipped by hand. Everything is made to order," Langer explained, as she carefully demonstrated the process before opening on a Friday in mid-April.

Langer points to two reasons why Pronto Pups have been a longtime crowd favorite.

"People love roadside attractions and people love fried foods, you know?" she said with a laugh.

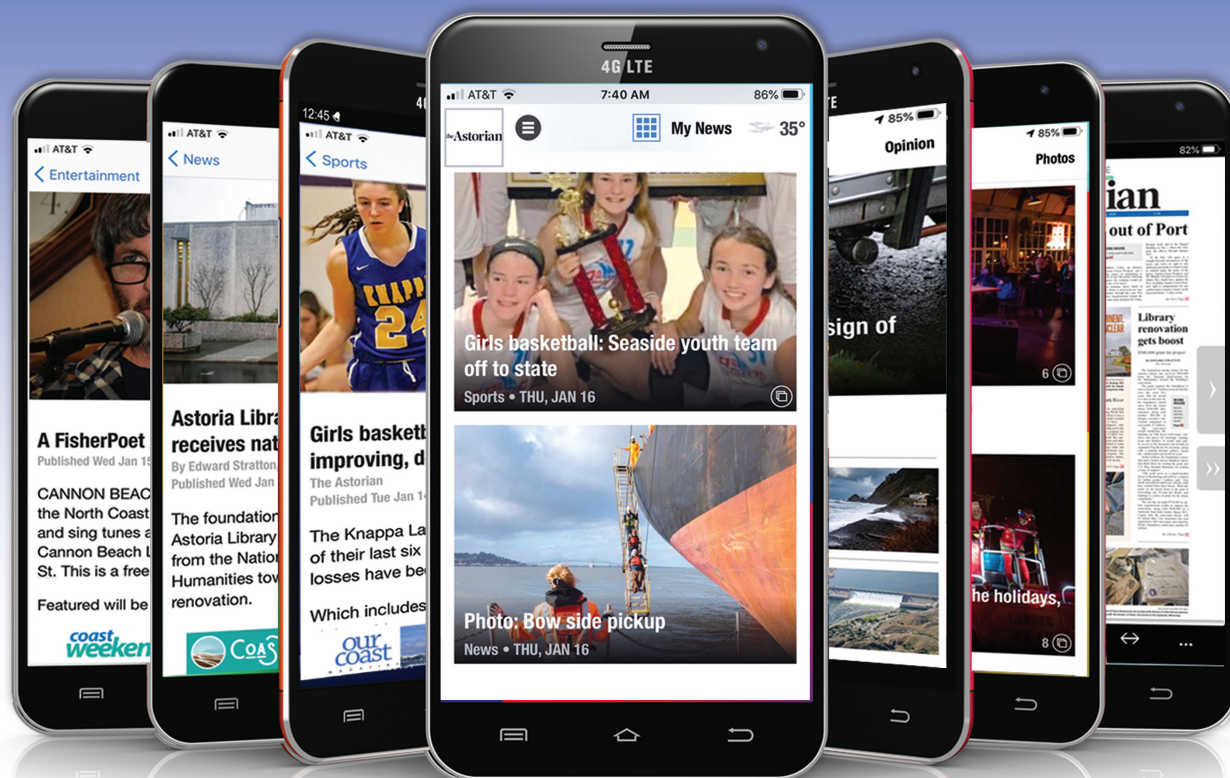
Karnis agreed, also with a chuckle.

"I know this much: that (customers are) willing to wait in line for one, and when they get it, a lot of times they'll, they'll get a handful of them, maybe 8, 9, 10... And they'll bring 'em and everyone's grabbing for their Pronto Pups, but they definitely have a complete look of total satisfaction because it's state fair time again. And we can get a freshly made hand-dipped, original Pronto Pup like we've done for generations."

Enjoyment of Pronto Pups is a tradition that spans both decades and geography, from the Oregon Coast to the Minnesota State Fair and back again.

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