

Spartanburg Journal



BY S. KIM HENSON | CONTRIBUTING

BRIAN AND SASSY HENRY started small with their big tasting pimento cheese, Palmetto Cheese. Brian grew up loving his mom's homemade recipe.

Around 1995, Brian's wife Sassy took over making pimento cheese for him and concocted her own mixture. It became a staple for tailgating parties at Braves games.

It wasn't until they moved to Pawleys Island and purchased Sea View Inn that the blend of cheeses, mayo and spices got its official name and gained notoriety.

Sassy admits Palmetto Cheese is a bit of a tongue twister with pimento cheese, but the name honors the state where it originated and she said, "It seems to work."

Palmetto Cheese's container has on it a picture of Vertrella Brown. She cooks her Gullah and Low Country cuisine at Sea View Inn.

Brown took Sassy's original pimento cheese recipe and tweaked the seasoning mixture to enhance its Southern soulful taste. The cheese is served to guests on the porch of Sea View Inn on Wednesday evenings as an appetizer for the Low Country shrimp boil.

"Even though pimento cheese is thought of as a southern food, this product fits the whole country because of its ingredients," said Andrew Smart, president of Duke Sandwich Productions which in the last two years has taken over as manufacturer and distributor.

Low Country staple makes big play in Upstate market

Southerners are familiar with it as an appetizer and sandwich spread. It appeals to Northerners because it's made with sharp cheddar cheese rather than the usual processed and American cheeses.

Other ingredients include Hellmann's Mayonnaise and just the right combination of spices that Brian said puts its taste "over the top." Recipes are plentiful on their Web site (www.palmettocheese.com) and Facebook Fan Page. Customers are finding new ways to eat Palmetto Cheese daily: with oysters and crackers, spread on pizza crust and smothered on chicken before baking.

When production increased at Sea View Inn, the Henrys, Brown and some of the staff would mix and hand pack the pimento cheese assembly-line style. They called on George Easterling, family friend and former boxer, to step in and stir.

Last year, Easterling mixed by hand about 600 containers a week to serve to guests at the inn, to sell at mom and pop stores like Independent Seafood in Georgetown, S.C., and to donate for charity events in the area. Sassy said about bringing Easterling on board, "We needed someone with a strong arm to mix it."

For nearly two years Brian distributed Palmetto Cheese to cities including Greenville, Columbia, Charleston and Atlanta. He would leave Pawleys Island just before midnight so he could make deliveries by 4 a.m. One of the first chain grocery stores to handle the product was the Publix on Pelham Road in Greenville.

Eleven more Publix stores in and around the area, like Simpsonville and Mauldin, started buying the product. Brian said, "The Greenville area is really where we got started on a grander scale."

550,000

containers of Palmetto Cheese sold throughout eight Southeastern states

When he found himself at a Columbia exit one December around four in the morning, delivering to an individual who placed an order to give as Christmas presents, he and his wife realized the cheese's "fan potential." They knew they needed a manufacturer and distributor.

Duke Sandwich Productions, whose plant is in Simpsonville, S.C., contacted Brian. John Mack, vice president of operations, bought the product in an Upstate store, liked it and called

the number on the container. Brian happened to be making deliveries in Greenville when he received the call in March of 2008. Since the manufacturing plant was nearby, Brian checked it out that day. Three hours later a partnership began.

The company has perfected the formula for mass production. Duke Sandwich Productions uses a proprietary mixer that mimics hand stirring. After it is mixed, each container is hand packed to maintain Palmetto Cheese's texture. They produce two versions: Original and Jalapeno.

Nathan Kirk Designs designed the truck wrap to advertise Palmetto Cheese. As of April, two of Duke Sandwich Productions' trucks are on the road and showing off the product. The company is also launching a Web site within the next few weeks so the cheese can be ordered online by individuals.

Sales are gaining momentum as friends tell friends and grocers are being hounded to carry Palmetto Cheese in their stores. Smart said in two years time they've gone from scooping Hellmann's Mayonnaise from a 30 pound container to pumping it from a 2,000 pound one.

Last year 550,000 containers were sold throughout eight Southeastern states. Palmetto Cheese is now being sold in more than 1,000 stores in 10 states, mostly in the Southeast, however it is as far-reaching as Maryland and Texas. Sassy said, "The sky is the limit!"