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BEST of COBB

“A little pep” in their STEP

FROM PEACHTREE TO PAWLEY'S ISLAND, THE FOUNDERS OF PIMENTO CHEESE GIANTS **PALMETTO CHEESE** PROVE THAT THE RECIPE FOR SUCCESS IS A GOOD IDEA, HARD WORK AND A LOT OF LOVE.

STORY AND PHOTOS BY **KATY RUTH CAMP**

If

you like pimiento cheese and have ever stepped foot in a Southern grocery store, you likely have seen tubs of Palmetto Cheese lining the shelves. “The pimiento cheese with soul!” is inscribed on its side, alongside a tribute to Pawley’s Island, S.C. A grayscale photo of an older woman in an apron who looks as though she knows what she’s doing in the kitchen adorns the tubs’ lids.

But while that woman, Vertrella Brown, has indeed made her fair share of the infamous Palmetto Cheese and other soulful foods, Palmetto Cheese belongs to the husband-and-wife team of Brian and Sassy Henry.

The Henrys spoke before a sold-out crowd of Marietta Garden Club members in March at the Marietta Educational Garden Center as a benefit for MEGC’s kitchen renovations and shared the story of how they developed one of the South’s favorite brands of pimiento cheese.

The early days

In the early 1990s, during the heyday of Atlanta Braves baseball, the Henrys were dating and Sassy was putting the old saying “the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach” to work.



Sassy and Brian Henry, founders of Palmetto Cheese pimiento cheese, recently shared their story before a group of 70 members of the Marietta Council of Garden Clubs during a luncheon at the historic Marietta Educational Garden Center.

I thought,

WELL, I CAN DO
THAT. I CAN FIGURE
THAT OUT.



The luncheon featured colorful fresh flowers in vases of various boot styles, as well as a full Southern tea lunch spread for the nearly 70 guests.

"I started making it because his mother made it for him when we would go visit his parents and he loved pimiento cheese so I thought, well, I could do that. I can figure that out. So I started working with it with the plain cheese ring with the jelly in the middle for holidays and we loved that, cheese straws and then pimiento cheese. I thought it was good, I wo'd him, and I'd take it to Braves games in the early 90s at the tailgates and people seemed to really like it," Sassy explained.

Whether it was the pimiento cheese or Sassy's sweet disposition, it worked and the Henrys married and started a family. In 2002, the young family was living in Atlanta but looking for a change of pace from the hustle and bustle of the big city.

Brian, who grew up in southern Louisiana "Cajun Country" thought something from his roots would be great. But Sassy spent the summers of her youth visiting Pawley's Island, S.C., a laid-back little coastal Carolina beach town that she loved. They visited, and reminders of Brian's youth began sprouting up along the fishing piers and friendly faces. So, when the historic Sea View Inn came up for sale, they took a chance.

"Brian was working at Coca-Cola and he was like, 'Well, that's great and all, but what am I going to do?' And I was like, 'What do you mean, what are you going to do? You're like 'the guy.' You're going to be like the mayor of Sea View.' I talked him into just going to look at it, just find out what it's about. So we did and loved it and signed this management agreement with option to buy, which we eventually executed," Sassy said.

Brian said the couple packed up their kids and left almost in the middle of the night once the deal with Sea View was done, much to the surprise of their friends who thought surely they would decide against making such a bold move.

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"We just picked up like the Beverly Hillbillies in the middle of the night and left. It was crazy. But we had to be there for Sea View to open," Sassy added. "Our house was on the market for 13 months. We left our pets in the house, my sister watched our pets for a year, and she even said, 'Y'all literally left butter beans in your refrigerator. And I had to clean them out."

Sassy said the staff was a little wary of the young-looking couple, whom Brian said were 34 years

old but looked more like 25 at the time, but they soon won them over when they assured the staff they would preserve the peace and "forced relaxation" the inn has provided for nearly a century. To this day, the inn has no air conditioning, no televisions, no radios, no cell phone usage in public and no computers, other than a little computer corner.

The inn has a dining room that serves three meals a day, seven days a week, with a low country boil on Wednesday evenings. The "dinner bell" literally rings at 8:30 a.m. for breakfast, 1:15 for dinner (yes, they still use the Southern term of dinner for the midday meal) and 6:15 for the last meal of the day.

When the Henrys arrived, the restaurant (which is also open to non-guests wanting a good meal) was hosting a, well, interesting array of themed dinner nights.

"They were serving Mexican food and having Thai night. Thai. At the beach," Brian said, with a laugh. "Most of our guests are coming from Charlotte, Atlanta, Chattanooga, that sort of thing, so they can get Thai or Mexican on any corner. That's not what they're coming here for."

So Sassy, who had spent years working in an executive dining room, met with the kitchen staff to talk through what might work best for the restaurant.

"I said, 'What do you cook at home?' It was like they had never been asked. So they sheepishly are telling me, 'Well, we do fried pork chops and baked ham and lowcountry food,' so I was like, 'Alright, that's what I want you to make here. People are coming here for sweet tea and your food, they're not coming here for Thai night.' So we changed the whole menu, I think for the better. They're in their wheelhouse now and they do it really well."

Nearly everyone who was on staff when the Henrys arrived are still on staff today. Some, like Vertrella on the lid, have even worked at the Inn for nearly 40 years.

"We had a small family when we moved to Pawley's, but our family got a lot bigger overnight.

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The luncheon was a benefit for the Marietta Educational Garden Center's new kitchen renovations, which have been needed for some time at the historic home and event space.

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We had a

SMALL FAMILY WHEN WE MOVED TO PAWLEY'S, BUT OUR FAMILY GOT A LOT BIGGER OVERNIGHT. THAT STAFF IS A BIG PART OF OUR EXTENDED FAMILY, NOW.



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Victoria and Joe Chastain, pictured here, spoke of their love of Pawley's Island before the Henrys gave their presentation on the island, their inn and the history of Palmetto Cheese. Next page: A piano rests in the front room of the historic Marietta Educational Garden Center, and centerpieces of colorful boots and flowers adorned each dining table during the luncheon.

"That staff is a big part of our extended family, now," Sassy said.

The deets on the cheese

As the popularity of the Wednesday low country boil grew, Sassy found that they would need to serve more food – including dips, vegetable trays, chips and salsa and – you guessed it – pimiento cheese.

"The guests really seemed to like it. It's a Southern food, a good memory food," Sassy said.

So after a few years of owning the inn and finally settling into running it efficiently, the Henrys started to think about what else they could do on the side, especially to occupy them during the four months of the year that the inn is closed.

Brian got his real estate license, thinking he might start flipping houses. One night, he was sitting in his office with Sassy and he asked her: "What are you passionate about?"

She thought about it and replied: "My pimiento cheese."



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Palmetto Cheese currently comes in three varieties, pictured here: with bacon, with jalapenos and original. Next page: Tea sandwiches and raffle baskets were a big hit during the luncheon.

Brian was a little surprised but took her seriously, so they developed a plan of how they could start marketing the pimiento cheese – which was and still is Sassy's own recipe – to local grocers.

While the recipe came easy, the name to call the cheese took a little more time.

"We were at an impasse and couldn't figure it out," Brian said. "One night, we had a party and we had a bunch of our close friends there. Our nextdoor neighbor came up to Sassy and I and said, 'Hey, did you guys bring some of that Palmetto cheese from the Inn?' And we said, 'You mean pimiento cheese?' Then we were like, wait a minute, Palmetto is Palmetto state, South Carolina, Palmetto Cheese is a slip of the tongue because people mispronounce it sometimes, so, I think I left the party. Right away, I got on my computer to see if it was trademarked. It wasn't. so I immediately filed for the trademark and that took about a year. But low and behold, Palmetto Cheese was born."

The first retail supporter came in the form of the local seafood dealer, which sold the tubs on ice next to the mullet. Next came the local Food Lion, then Piggly Wiggly, and the Henrys thought they were set with no idea of what was to come next.

"That Piggly Wiggly, at its peak, was selling 500 containers of Palmetto Cheese a week. A week! Right there in Pawley's. So imagine how many people in the summers from Charlotte, Atlanta, from all over, would pick that up," Brian said. Sassy added that she would often get phone calls from store managers saying people from out of town were buying 10 tubs at a time to take home with them.

With Pawley's Island drawing people from all over the Southeast, visitors to the island who had grown to love Palmetto Cheese began asking their local grocers back home why they weren't carrying it. One particularly persistent woman in Pelham, S.C. wasn't taking "no" for an answer so, finally, the store manager of the town Publix called the Henrys and asked if they could bring some of the cheese to the store.

The catch: people wouldn't be able to buy it at the register, but rather would have to bring cash, go to the back of the store and buy it out of the stockroom. Still, it worked, and after driving four hours one way multiple times to stock up the one store, an exhausted Brian called Publix and said there would need to be more stores in that area selling the cheese if he was going to keep making the drive. So they did, and it eventually grew to 11 stores in the area.

A star is born

From South Carolina, Palmetto Cheese expanded into the Charleston, N.C. and Atlanta markets, and the Henrys found themselves needing to find a manufacturer to produce it and help with distribution because the Henrys and their staff were "worn out."

They found a partner in Duke Food Productions out of Greenville, S.C. and, today, Palmetto Cheese can be found in 9,300 grocery stores in 47 states and nearly 250,000 containers are being sold each week. In 2018, 13 million containers of Palmetto Cheese were sold. That's a lot of pimiento cheese!

Palmetto Cheese comes in three varieties – original, with jalapenos and with bacon. Brian said they just launched a brand of chicken salad and a smoked cheddar variety is also in the works.

But, just like the pace of their beloved island, the Henrys believe in taking everything slow and doing it right.

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