



Cardin transfers trays of freshly baked pretzels into a bin where they will cool. The company produces as many as 5,000 pretzels on a busy day.

New Twist

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They left the Louisville International Airport and drove directly to the bakery to make sure they got fresh pretzels before they were sold out.

That was excellent planning. The week of Schweizer Fest the little bakery sold pretzels as fast as it made them, and it made thousands, but still ran out.

"People grew up with them. ... They were teething rings, so to speak, in that day. They bring back the past (and) something about family and community," Sandy says. "It's like a tribe."

Tell City customers would tell stories of sneaking pretzel pieces into Catholic school in the afternoon and hiding them in their mouths, which kept the nuns oblivious to the contraband. Maybe the nuns had forgotten that pretzels were used in Europe more than 1,000 years before as treats for children for reciting their prayers and learning Bible verses.

The pretzel's ties to history doesn't end in church. The word itself is probably a derivative of "bracchium," which is the Latin word for arm. A pretzel's shape resembles arms folded in prayer.

Tell City Pretzel eaters might not worship the twisted tid-bits, but they do impart an obvious adoration.

Customers who visit the bakery fawn over the bags looking for their favorites, inspecting each as if they were fondling heirlooms. Some want pretzels with a lot of salt, or a bag filled with the dark ones that have a burned taste, or the ones that are virtually saltless.

"Knowing the recipe and making the Tell City pretzel are two different things," Brad says. "It's the process. Each step has its thing, its look and feel. That is what makes them personal. That is what makes it unique."

The recipe is a mix of flour, salt, yeast and water, four ingredients found in most kitchens.

And the finished product is found just about everywhere else in southern Indiana.

Kerry Weisheit manages Headquarters, known in Jasper and beyond as an after-work oasis where the advice is free and the beer is well chilled. Since Tell City pretzels returned to the snack rack in August they quickly became the tavern's top snack food, right up there with the hot mixed nuts.

The 4-ounce bags of pretzels are easy to spot. They hang on a frame in the upper right corner above the back bar. Scattered

around the frame are some bar-food wannabes with tediously pedestrian sameness despite their catchy names, zesty this and spicy that. Nationally, pretzels rank behind potato chips and in front of popcorn as snacks, with \$180 million in annual sales, according to the Snack Food Association of America.

Kerry figures he tosses about 50 bags of Tell City pretzels across the bar each week to his regular customers and to a few who are trying the hand-twisted twice-baked pretzels for the first time.

They lead the way in snack sales partly because the hand twisting ensures the contents in each bag never look the same and partly because they come lightly salted, heavily salted, burned or with no salt at all and sometimes all of those in a single bag, partly because they are made in nearby Tell City, partly because of their unique taste; and partly because they've been around such a long time, despite the break in production before the Smiths bought the company.

And one more thing: Most pretzels that populate the world are churned out by machines. They aren't durable and rarely has a machine-produced pretzel survived a single swipe through the chive dip.

But a Tell City pretzel is built to take it, and give it right back.

That could explain why consumers dunk them in beer, or slather them with hot mustard, and coat them with cheese spread, all ostensibly to enhance the taste or because that is the way they learned to eat them. The truth is this: A well-baked Tell City pretzel is capable of defiling an orthodontist's best work.

Weisheit, 45, chomped into a pretzel with the reckless abandon of youth as a 19-year-old. The dentist removed what was left of the cracked molar the next week.

Still, a few pretzel fans love 'em plain. "I wouldn't know how to make them softer," Brad says, "given the recipe."

The secret recipe is not much of a secret — Brad knew what it was before he and Sandy completed the deal — and many of the former employees know it. It's the process, Brad says, that makes the difference.

The Smiths haven't tinkered with that process, right down to the antique dough mixer and equally aged finishing oven that came with the bakery. Both were manufactured during the Truman administration.

"The investor in me says there has got to be a way I can buy some machinery to do this ... but I don't think so. It's odd. ... I came in and I can't change anything," Brad says.

He did buy a machine that seals and labels the bags of pretzels, but that has noth-

ing to do with the process; a human being counts and places the pretzels in the bags.

When the factory reopened, Brad and his crew — which ranges from two to four — were making about 5,000 pretzels each day.

Production leveled off to about half that number during the fall, and picked up again as the holidays neared. During that time Brad has fielded a few complaints with the congratulations. Early on, some pretzels broke into pieces before the consumer could smash the bag with a fist — a popular way to create bite-size chunks. They were too salty for some, not salty enough for others. Where did the burned ones go? some customers asked. Others questioned if the pretzels were as hard as they used to be.

Brad managed his own real estate business before getting into pretzels and understands customer service and product quality.

"It's a product I am proud to make. It's easy to get motivated to make this and try to sell it because you know that people enjoy it. Anytime somebody calls (with a complaint) we absolutely try to fix it. We have thousands of people who eat this product. You worry if they will like it," Brad says.

So far that hasn't been a problem, for the pretzel tribe is blossoming. Tell City Pretzel Co. has a Facebook page with more than 1,000 fans — many from around the globe — who order pretzels by mail. Chocolate ones are available, and the company is developing hot 'n' spicy and garlic-flavored varieties.

Meanwhile, the snack maintains its status as a regional commodity and is distributed to bars, groceries and convenience stores in 17 southern Indiana counties. Brad is trying to convince distributors in Louisville and elsewhere to take on the product. He estimates the bakery could hand twist and bake 10,000 pretzels a day if the need arises.

"You get outside of southern Indiana and it's a tough sell. My brother was in Columbus (Ohio) and he said, 'Bring up some pretzels.' They couldn't get enough of them. So that's a challenge to us to convince distributors these will sell."

Sandy insists it's the taste — not the location — that makes the pretzels popular in southern Indiana and will one day be the reason the snacks find a much larger market — the world.

Maybe packaging the local history would help.

"I never dreamt there was so much passion that could be stirred up over pretzels," she says.



Top: Lively eyes a tray of freshly twisted pretzels as she prepared to move them into the main oven.

Above: Smith, right, delivers boxes of pretzels to Hedinger Beverage in Jasper, one of two distributors who get his product into local bars and stores. Last week, Smith dropped off four boxes to Roger Eckerle, left, and Shawn Matheis.

Left: Smith inherited more than just a famous pretzel recipe when he took over the Tell City Pretzel Co. this summer. The factory equipment, much of which has been in use since the 1970s, is an integral part of the process. Smith checked the flame on the main oven, formerly a pizza oven that has been converted to bake pretzels, while baking in October.