

KEEPING A CORNY TRADITION

by Kristen Tribe

“Say corny dogs!” shouts Shonnery Pettit from behind her camera at the State Fair of Texas in Dallas. For years, her family has traveled from Mesquite, Texas, to enjoy and pose with a famous piece of culinary history: Fletcher’s Corny Dogs, considered the original corn dog.

“I grew up coming to the fair to show cattle, and every year I had to have a Fletcher’s Corny Dog,” Pettit says. “My husband, Tom, is from Wisconsin, and I introduced him to them. We’ve even brought his parents out here and said, ‘You’ve got to try this.’”

When brothers Carl and Neil Fletcher invented the batter-dipped, deep-fried hot dog in their Dallas kitchen and sold it for the first time in 1942 at the State Fair of Texas, they couldn’t have imagined its enduring popularity. Today, descendants of the Fletcher brothers sell nearly 500,000 corny dogs during the fair’s 24-day run, scheduled Sept. 28 to Oct. 21 this year.

“We’ve had quite a love affair with the people that visit the fair,” says Skip Fletcher, 72, who, along with his brother Bill, runs Fletcher’s Corny Dogs. “I think we captured the public’s imagination with something new, different and good.”

Ann Beddingfield, 65, of Frankston, Texas (pop. 1,209), has been coming to the state fair for 50 years, and she says the first corn dog she ate as a child was a Fletcher’s. “I’d never seen anything like it,” Beddingfield says. “It was a special treat. We didn’t have hot dogs every day like kids do now.”

Fletcher’s Corny Dogs taste better than their competitors because they are so crispy, Beddingfield says. Skip says each dog should have a “certain crunch” and is cooked according to the original recipe. It’s hand-dipped in a cornmeal-based batter and cooked for three and a half minutes in a 365-degree vat of peanut oil.

“At least once a day, I go to all six stands (at the fair) to check the quality of the product,” he says. “Corny dogs are simple, but they ain’t easy.”

As a 7-year-old, Skip was the official taste tester for his father, Neil, and Uncle Carl as they developed the recipe in his mother’s Dallas kitchen. “It was tough to achieve a balance where it would stay on the stick and still taste good,” he says, adding that the recipe evolved over a three-month period.

Carl and Neil were “song and dance men,” says Skip, and they had a popular tent show in Dallas for many years. Eventually, they gave up performing for more traditional jobs, but their independent spirits pushed their experimentation in the kitchen and development of the corny dog.

No one is sure how the duo decided on the name for their product, but Skip and his wife, G.G., think it is a play on the words “cornmeal” and “carnie,” named both for the batter and their fellow carnival workers.

Carl and Neil died within a year of each other in the late 1980s, and Skip and Bill took over the business.

Fletcher’s Corny Dogs were sold only at the State Fair until 1995, when the Fletchers opened a new stand under the name Corny Dog Pit at the Texas Motor Speedway in Fort Worth.

Today, Fletcher’s Corny Dogs are available only at the fair, the speedway and a few Texas festivals, so fans don’t mind waiting in lines that snake around the stand to get their annual taste of culinary history for \$3.50. Some customers are so steadfast in their tradition that they buy their corny dog from the same stand year after year. In return, the Fletchers work hard to make their customers happy.

“We take it seriously,” Skip says. “We don’t want anyone to get a bad dog.”