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# HAMILTON COUNTY

May 4, 2005

## NOBLESVILLE: COMINGS & GOINGS

### Pair's spicy salsa becomes hot seller

Marsh to sell brand that began at home

**By Bruce C. Smith**  
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A look at new businesses and those in transition  
Friends raved about the homemade salsa that Charlie and Glenda Ferguson, of Noblesville, cooked up in their Hamilton County farm kitchen.

They had hundreds of pepper plants and other veggies in their garden.

So each summer, they'd cook 140 or 180 quarts of salsa for their own enjoyment and to share.

"We just wanted something different from what you could find in the market, without the salt but with plenty of taste," Charlie Ferguson said. "A friend said it was so good that we could sell it."

Well, call him Crazy Charlie -- crazy like a fox.

The Fergusons formed C&G Salsa Co., plotted a business strategy to begin selling their concoctions and racked up some prestigious cooking contest awards.

Last year -- after just two years on the market -- they sold 50,000 pints of Crazy Charlie's salsa with a goal of 100,000 pints this year.

Already retailed in 200 Kroger grocery stores in the Midwest, Crazy Charlie's salsa is hitting the shelves of at least 80 locations of Fishers-based Marsh grocery stores this month.

The word is spreading through other venues, such as Indiana's growing industry of small wineries, Mexican food outlets and markets featuring




zoom


Charles and Glenda Ferguson, of Noblesville, own Crazy Charlie's salsa. They used to make it for themselves and friends, but its popularity led them to sell it. -- Joe Vitti / The Star


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fresh produce.

Their salsa is billed as an all-natural product, extremely low in sodium and carbohydrates. It has the natural salts and sugars from the tomatoes, spicy and sweet peppers, onions, cilantro, garlic, lime juice and other secret ingredients.

Most of all, he said, "as much as possible, we use only ingredients grown in Indiana. The tomatoes are from Red Gold."

Salsa comes in mild (flavorful, a little zesty), medium (initial heat, lots of flavor) or hot (initial heat that builds but not five alarm).

Crazy Charlie's has added a line of chili sauce that also comes in a couple of intensities.

Back at the farm, they're cooking up test batches of recipes for new but undisclosed products to be launched soon, expanding the Crazy Charlie's brand.

They gush about the help they received from Purdue University as an upstart, mom-and-pop business facing a maze of state and federal regulations in the food industry.

Charlie, 53, is an electrician at the Allison Transmission plant on Indianapolis' Westside. He's also a pilot of small airplanes and a scuba diver and instructor.

Glenda, 55, is a former legal secretary for firms in Indianapolis and Noblesville. For four years, she has operated her own home-based business, WordCue, typing closed captioning narratives for locally produced television programs and commercials.

In 2001, the Fergusons suspected they had a salsa product with some potential, and they were flush with ideas and enthusiasm.

"Then, we spent a year studying and learning about the business and finding a co-packer (factory to produce large quantities) of our salsa. Purdue helped us a lot with things like getting the labels right to meet (federal) requirements," he said.

Purdue experts also helped with critical health issues, such as learning the acidic content that is required to prevent harmful bacteria in the food, so the product remains safe on the store shelves. It must be refrigerated after a jar is open.

The Fergusons cooked up some suggested recipes that are on the labels and in printed brochures.

They sold their salsa at all kinds of places, such as food tastings in Kahn's Fine Wines and Spirits shop in Carmel. They've sold it in displays at grocery stores, gift and hobby shows at the state fairgrounds, at cooking demonstrations and on food shows of several local radio and television stations.

Much like another Hamilton County-based, family owned company, Atkins Elegant Deserts, that launched a national corporation with a lot of work and a little news media attention, Crazy Charlie's has been getting some positive coverage.

It began with the "people's preference award" in the 2003 International Zesty Foods Show in Texas, followed by other ribbons in competitions for barbecue, salsa and chili sauce makers.

Those wins drew news coverage in the Indianapolis metro area.

In April 2004, Time magazine published a feature story on "foodies" such as the Fergusons who were trying to turn a favorite kitchen treat into fun and profit at the supermarkets.

The national news magazine story also told of the young Charlie who grew up in Beech Grove loving his father's spicy food and learning about backyard garden peppers.

Then he renewed that culinary love when he and Glenda were married. Her family had a farm between Noblesville and Westfield, where the couple lived and grew peppers and began cooking up salsa to use up their crop.

Charlie said they're still having fun and overflowing with ideas for new products and ways to promote them. Instead of giving away their creations, the Fergusons now sell them for \$4.95 a pint.

They continue to appear on cooking shows. He's planning a line of shirts or other Crazy Charlie's clothing.

"We were on the nose cone of Brad Pollard's Infinity Pro Series car last year," he said, referring to a sponsorship of a race car.

Grocery retailers say Crazy Charlie's salsa is a big seller.

At the Fresh Market in Cool Creek Commons on 146th Street in Westfield, the salsa moves quickly, and the Fergusons have had tastings in the store.

"It's a great product, and we sell tons of it," said Jeff Levernier, assistant manager. "We keep it on display around the store. It's a hot item."

**Call Star reporter Bruce C. Smith at (317) 444-2605.**

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