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# Crazy Charlie whips up winning salsas

## He wins twice at Fiery Food contest

By TOM CAMPBELL

The Fiery Food Challenge in Fort Worth, Texas, always brings out the big hitters. The 2003 competition was no exception, even though it may have sounded like a bunch of truckers using their CB handles.

There was Ole Ray, talking with Wild Joe. Over there was the legendary Hoboken Eddie. And word was spreading that Insane Dave was in the house.

And right in the middle of it all was Indiana's own, Charlie Ferguson of Noblesville.

Sure, Ferguson has the requisite nickname, calling himself Crazy Charlie ("some people say I'm crazy like a fox," he says). But Ferguson and his wife, Glenda, are relative neophytes to the business of salsa. In fact, this was the first contest they entered.

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*"Getting my degree from Purdue has been like marrying into a great family. I just call up and they are able to help us solve any problem."*

*- Charlie Ferguson, aka Crazy Charlie*

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Photo by Tom Campbell

*Charlie and Glenda Ferguson's recipe for salsa not only has found a niche with customers, but it also has won awards in a prestigious national competition. Crazy Charlie's Gourmet Salsa is distributed in Indianapolis-area stores and also can be ordered online at <http://www.cqsalsa.com/>.*

Sure, they had been canning salsa for themselves and friends for seven years. Ferguson has traveled extensively throughout the Caribbean, Mexico and the Southwest over the past 30 years, sampling salsas, and squirreling away information that would help him achieve salsa nirvana.

But it wasn't until a year ago they (Charlie's the CEO, Glenda's the president) decided to share their recipes with the paying public, marketing under the label of Crazy Charlie's Gourmet Salsa, which comes in mild, medium and hot varieties.

Crazy Charlie's is an all-natural product that is low in sodium and low in carbohydrates, with no sugars or sweeteners added, making it, Ferguson proudly proclaims, "a very healthy salsa."

Not to mention tasty.

Crazy Charlie's Salsa was named winner of the 2003 International Zesty Foods People's Preference Award and also captured second place (salsa — habanero) and third place (salsa — general) in the 2004 Fiery Food Challenge. The contests were held simultaneously in Fort Worth in September.

"When they announced the winners, I thought I was going to cry," Charlie says. "It was just overwhelming."

The Fergusons are quick to credit Purdue with their meteoric rise to salsa fame.

"I can't say enough about the help Purdue has provided," says Ferguson, who called on Purdue's Department of Food Science to smooth some of the roadblocks that come with marketing a new product.

"We probably get 40 or 50 calls a year from people like Charlie who want to put a new product on the market," says Steve Smith, processing specialist and supervisor of the Food Science Department's Pilot Laboratory.

Product start-up costs can be staggering, especially for a family-owned business like Crazy Charlie's Salsa.

"It's our job to help them get started in any way we can, whether it's in helping them find a co-packer or helping them turn a recipe into a formula, taking it out of the kitchen and into a commercial production facility," Smith says.

The department routinely fields so many inquiries it has joined forces with the Department of Agricultural Economics to make plans to start CAFÉ (Center for Advanced Food Entrepreneurship). Coordinators of the proposed center will be Kirby Hayes, assistant professor of food science, and Maria Marshall, assistant professor of agricultural economics.

The combined forces of the two departments will be able to handle both financial and processing questions that entrepreneurs like the Fergusons will face during the scaling-up process.

Smith helped the Fergusons lower the pH level of their salsa, thus making it more acidic and less susceptible to foodborne pathogens.


"The people in the food science department have been great to us," Ferguson says. "Getting my degree from Purdue (he has an associate's degree in applied science from IUPUI) has been like marrying into a great family. I just call up and they are able to help us solve any problem."

The Noblesville couple had a lot riding on the Fiery Food Challenge and Crazy Charlie's Gourmet Salsa. They spent about \$6,000 for booth space, travel and lodging to participate in the Fiery Food Challenge. The competition, sponsored by Chile Pepper magazine, annually attracts over 800 entries in as many different categories as there are peppers.

Ferguson, in fact, uses a five-pepper blend (Anaheim, sweet banana, jalapeno, red chili and habanero) in his salsa.

But one lesson in the salsa manufacturing process he had to learn without Purdue's help.

"Animals used to destroy a large portion of our pepper plants," says Ferguson, who has planted as many as 650 pepper plants in his backyard garden.



“I learned that if you plant the hottest peppers, the habanero, along the outside of the garden, animals will still eat those peppers, but they’ll eat them just once. They are so hot, I’ll guarantee you they won’t come back.”

Crazy? Yep, just like a fox.

Contact Ferguson at <http://www.cgsalsa.com/>

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