

News Democrat

There's a sweet story behind couple's salsa

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Salsa Rose made Jean Lorenz stop in her tracks.

The Belleville court reporter was shopping at Rural King in Swansea on a gray Friday afternoon when James and Hope Reinneck offered her a sample.

The Reinnecks, of Mascoutah, handed out chips and salsa from behind a table covered with a red-checked cloth, laden with products they've created. The salsa, pint and quart size, costs \$3.50 and \$6.50. Zesty bread and butter pickles are \$4.60 a jar, and salsa-flavored meat sticks are \$6 a pack or \$1.30 each.



"The response is great," said James. "If they try it, they will buy it."

Jean did. She sampled the salsa, left to shop and came back.

"I love the taste of it," she said. "It doesn't taste like stuff you buy in the grocery store. That sounds so good to eat this weekend. My husband said, 'You need to go back and buy it.' He likes hot, though."

Fine. The Reinnecks sell both.

Which is more popular?

"It's 60-40, on mild versus hot," said James. "My hot is what I won (an) award for. What's cool about it is it's sweet. Thirty seconds later, it's got a kick. Everyone's palate is different. If you can stand a little heat, try the hot."

A gold star over barbed wire is part of Reinneck Ranch Inc.'s rustic logo design.

"He did the recipe," said Hope. "I helped with the label."

Hope, 43, is assistant VP in charge of operations at FCB Swansea Bank

A local Belleville business introduced the product.

"I started at 10th Street Bakery," said James, 53, who used to do industrial painting and inspection work on water towers. "I made it exclusively for (owner Don Harvierth) before we put it on the market."

"We had the first product on the shelves in September 2012."

You'll find it at Schnucks, Dierbergs, New Baden Market, Main Street Market in Belleville, Red Bud IGA Super Value in Carlyle, to name a few. It's in 110 stores, including Mount Vernon and Peoria. It's on the shelves at the new Fields Foods in Lafayette Square.

The Reinnecks enjoy meeting customers. Hope has a friendly way about her. She even helped a woman who wondered about the difference between sorghum and molasses.

"Want to sample our salsa?" she asks, handing cups of white tortilla chips for dipping.

"That's really good," said Terry Smith, of Fairview Heights, shopping with his dad. "It's really sweet. I like that. I am more of a mild guy. Is it supposed to taste sweet?"

"Sweetness comes from our fresh ingredients -- and a little brown sugar," said Hope.

A baby business

The Reinnecks' idea for a business got its start about the same time as their daughter, Jada Rose, now 5.

"She was born (Aug. 2, 2008) at 28 weeks," said James. "Three pounds 5 ounces. After she was born, my wife wanted to sit in the hospital and look at her."

He needed to be busy. He went home, made salsa and brought it back for the nurses.

"They were so encouraging. They said, 'This is so good, Mr. Reinneck. You should sell this.'"

Now, they do.

"The core of the dream is because of her," said James. "She's fine, smart. We are very thankful. She was in the hospital 52 days. We have a journal. It's life changing. Our heart goes out to people who go through that."

Jada, now a kindergartner, is aware of her connection to the family business.

"She thinks it's fun," said James. "She'll say, 'Where's that shirt that says, 'Hey, it's named after me?'"

A guy who likes to cook

James began making salsa 30 years ago.

"I ended up with a tremendous recipe. It's mine. I developed it on my own. I continue to develop new recipes."

He has won state fair awards for both salsa and pickles.

"He's a very good cook," said Hope. "He cooks 95 percent of the meals."

James credits his mom with getting him off to a good start.

"I grew up in Mascoutah, down the road from where I live now," he said. "We had huge gardens. We canned. I was in 4-H. We didn't have a lot of money."

James and Hope are avid gardeners.

When it's warm, he barbecues. His specialty is pork steaks. When it's cold, he makes chili.

Hope often uses salsa as an ingredient in recipes, as a sauce on meatballs or to top loaded potatoes.

"She did a lasagna (that) was awesome," said James. "She put salsa in just the top layer."

Busy times

The business keeps James on the move.

"I travel 750 to 1,000 miles a week to keep up with it all," he said. "From the little stores to the big stores, they are all important. Sharp's (Foods) in Mount Vernon sells a tremendous amount."

But there are challenges.

"We have an Amish factory where it's made," said James. "(Recently), the facility was demolished by fire. That's kind of a setback. We have product and inventory."

In his spare time, James builds wood display racks for their products.

"I branded them all myself with a branding iron," he said, of the logo design on the sides. "No two are the same. Stores love them. I have a little wood shop in the shed. I make them periodically."

When he's not on the road promoting his product or developing a new one, like the salsa-flavored meat sticks. "I like meat," said James. "I worked with one of the owners from Wenneman's (Meat Market in St. Libory) on the meat sticks. It took about six to eight months to complete the project from start to finish."

Next product in the works? Chili.

"Levi Rugged Chili," said James. "It's named after our son. He's 2."

<http://www.bnd.com/2014/03/23/3119176/theres-a-sweet-story-behind-couples.html>