

Serving the Sweetest Treats - Couple reflects on nearly 50 years of serving fair patrons

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The owner of a Putnam County Fair food truck scoops fluffy sugar from large vats Thursday until it becomes a pink, yellow and blue cotton candy cloud, like the dozens already hanging from the truck's ceiling.

It's Perfection Confections' best-selling item, and co-owner Siegrid LaFratta still uses vats that were custom-made in 1973.

She and her husband, James LaFratta, have had a 47-year career in the fair circuit with the same truck. The cotton candy is made fresh each day, as are the candy apples coated in caramel, sprinkles or chocolate. The caramel is even a special recipe that fairgoers can't get anywhere else.

But it's the people who keep a smile on the LaFrattas' faces throughout the long Putnam County Fair hours.

"I'm here to make sure you have a good time so when you leave the fair, you've only got good thoughts about how much fun you had and how much you enjoyed being there," James LaFratta said.

He started in the concessions business by working summers at his local racetrack and made friends in the business. But he had to take a break when he was drafted into the military – stationed in Germany.

However, that's where he and Siegrid met. The two married and moved back to America.

"I had no idea about any of this," she said, looking around the confectionary truck. "I thought I was going to be a typical American housewife – a little Cape Cod house, white picket fence. Didn't happen."

James started to work for his father in the family appliance store but Siegrid said her husband was unhappy. And when his French-fry-selling friend came to town, it once again sparked James' interest in concessions. "He came home one night and said, 'This concession stand's for sale. I really would like to buy it.' I said, 'Oh my God.' I said, 'Well, you're miserable. ... We'll try it,'" Siegrid said.

They tried one year in fried fair foods but decided that wasn't for them. But the "sugar end of the business" was, she said.

They started taking the Perfection Confections truck to Florida fairs in 1974. Siegrid said they have worked the circuit for so long, they saw many fairgoers grow up and have kids of their own.

“We see the same faces in the window. A lot of places (we see) third or fourth generations we’re serving,” Siegrid LaFratta said. “And you’re just happy to see them. They’re happy to see us. It’s like a vocation. It’s a calling, I guess you could call it.”

Despite the bustling Putnam County Fair crowds this year, the tone was much different last year. Frankie Carpenter, who works with the LaFrattas, said every fair employee was out of work when the coronavirus pandemic hit. He got a job driving tractor-trailers to stay afloat.

“You can only imagine how it would be to go 12 months without (a) paycheck,” Carpenter said.

The Putnam County Fair was the first on the circuit to be canceled last year and the Perfection Confections’ team had to throw away thousands of dollars worth of supplies, he said.

Perfection Confections sits on the corner of the Putnam County Fair’s food section this year, and next to it is Carrie’s Sweet Shoppe. The two truck owners are friends, and Sweet Shoppe owner Carrie Howland has been working the concession stand for 16 years.

“The people are interesting and (the fair’s) its own little city,” she said.

Howland works fairs in Illinois and Florida with her truck that sells treats like elephant ears, funnel cakes and deep-fried Oreos. She said she plans to work 21 fairs this year.

The pandemic also disrupted her schedule last year, but her husband still worked in Illinois so they were able to live off his income.

“It was tough,” Howland said. Carpenter, who is a

fourth-generation fair employee, said he is glad to be back. Perfection Confections’ first fair back after the pandemic was the Florida Strawberry Festival earlier this month and the Clay County Fair will be the next stop for the team come April 1.

“But the thing is ... God’s in charge and without Him, we could never do what we do,” Carpenter said. “He gives us the strength every day to be here to do this. ... We’re just regular, God-fearing, love-the-USA people.”

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