

Kernel Curt

Madison businessman Curt Roeming tends to a unique aspect of pop culture on the Capitol Square.

Popcorn, America's favorite snack food and the official snack of Illinois, is not all hot air. In fact, around the country, 17 billion quarts of popcorn are consumed every year — enough to fill the Empire State Building in New York City 18 times!

Curt Roeming of Curt's Gourmet Popcorn LLC has peddled the puffy maize on and around Madison's Capitol Square for over 30 years, through cart upgrades and location changes. These days, the company's cheery red wagon is usually found at the top of State Street, attracting customers with a penchant for popcorn.

A friend's family introduced Roeming to vending decades ago, and he quickly relished the idea of peddling to the public. "I really enjoy meeting different people and going to different places," he says. "People always seem to be eating it in a fun place."

He built his original cart with the help of his father and launched the business in 1985, serving gourmet popcorn, cheese, and caramel flavors. For a while, hot dogs and polish sausage were also on the menu.

About 10 years ago people began suggesting new popcorn flavor varieties and Roeming complied. "We started making cheddar jalapeño and a sour cream and chive variety, and now we have about 50 different flavors that we can make to fill online orders, but there are 10 standards that will always be produced."

POPPING OVER

On this rare, sunny morning, Roeming prepares to whip up the first of several popcorn batches for the day. His cooking area is small but adequate. A popcorn maker is heating up and large rubber containers hold different types of seeds. Two large pots, or tumblers, sit idle along the opposite wall, and two stainless steel containers of coconut oil, one golden in color and one red, warm on a multiple-burner gas stove.

"Some people use canola or vegetable oil, but I've always preferred coconut," Roeming notes.

It's not rocket science. Seeds are

dumped into an electric popping machine with some seasoning salt and within two minutes, popped corn bubbles over into a bin below, but when producing many gallons and varieties at a time, kernels start flying.

"You have to be ready," Roeming grins. As one batch is quickly emptied into a 10-gallon tumbler, another batch is about to begin popping. Sixty-four ounces of kernels yield 10-gallons of popcorn, he says, as he adds a white cheddar cheese powder to the yellow oil container and stirs until smooth and silky in consistency. Then he scoops the mixture over the tumbling batch with a ladle.

The 10-gallon tumblers rotate the newly popped kernels and distribute the flavoring. "We use the wet-pop method (oil) because I am not a fan of air-popped popcorn," Roeming says. The process may shorten the snack's longevity, but the payoff, he believes, is in the flavor.

Curt's Gourmet Popcorn uses three types of seeds, gourmet white, premium yellow, and caramel sweet (aka mushroom corn), which is for caramel and kettle corn because the seeds are larger and pop to a rounded shape.

On a typical summer day the business may pop 50 gallons of caramel corn, 30 gallons of cheese, 20 gallons of jalapeño white cheddar, 20 gallons of sour cream and chive, 15 gallons of buffalo blue cheese, and 50 gallons of gourmet white, the most popular among cart customers and Roeming's personal favorite.

"We usually order 50 bags of each style of seed every two months," he says, adding that the food cart is largely dependent on weather. "We will downscale our batches if rain is predicted." Summer humidity also affects the product. "When it's humid, we want to pop and get it bagged as soon as we can because humidity affects its longevity. We put it in an air conditioned room immediately so it will last longer."

The business also welcomes custom requests, allowing customers to experiment with unique flavors — five gallons at a time.



The art of making popcorn begins with a large, commercialized popper. After the kernels fall into a catch basin, they are scraped out and put in a tumbler. Cheese is added to warmed coconut oil and the mixture is poured over the newly popped kernels and tumbled until coated.



Curt Roeming, founder of Curt's Gourmet Popcorn LLC, in one of the company's two popcorn carts. Roeming has branched into other businesses over the years, but remains committed to the carts. "We've been on the Square 32 years," he says. "My goal is to reach 50. That's only 18 more years."

FROM KITCHEN TO FLIPPER

Roeming, 54, branched into other businesses through the years: Top Quality Carpet Cleaning, which he opened in 1996, and real estate development. In fact, of his three ventures, popcorn accounts for only about 10% of his time these days, (carpet cleaning, 60%; real estate, 30%), but he loves the product no less.

During the warmer months, he'll spend about four hours a day in his commercial kitchen on Gilson Street making popcorn. He owns the building and hopes to transform the space into a larger, rentable commercial kitchen in the not-too-distant future, but for now, it works. A tenant, Gili, operates the food cart "Toast" and shares half the kitchen space.

Roeming acquired the building in 2010. At the same time, he purchased five other blighted buildings nearby that he and his son have been renovating. He admits that it's hard for him to let go of those properties after all the sweat equity. "I started as a flipper, now I'm a hoarder!" he laughs, adding that the neighbors and the city are thrilled with the changes he's brought to this little area off Olin Avenue where prostitution and drugs once took hold. Soon, Funk

Factory Geuzeria, a sour beer facility producing beer from wine barrels will open across the street as the neighborhood, affectionately called "Curt's Corner," begins thriving once again.

STIGMATIZED NO MORE

One of the longest food carts operating in the downtown area, Curt's Gourmet Popcorn operates two popcorn carts. A smaller one, Wally's Wandering Popcorn Stand, was named in memory of his dad and is used more sparingly at special events.

A lot has changed over the years, Roeming acknowledges. "When I first started, I was in front of the glass bank. There were just a few carts but a whole lot of people. Business was hopping."

There was a stigma back then, too, he notes. "People kind of frowned upon vendors as not being a positive thing. Restaurants thought we were taking business from them, and people wondered if carts had undergone health inspections. It really has evolved, and I'm excited about where it's going. The quality of carts and the types of foods offered is great, even if it is competition."

Curt's Gourmet Popcorn cart sells bags of pre-popped flavored varieties for

between \$2 and \$8, but the gourmet white popcorn is always popped fresh onsite. The company has a healthy corporate and online business, as well, and a solid following among bars that appreciate the spicy varieties made with jalapeño, chipotle, or habanero spices. "It helps them sell more beer," Roeming states. His son developed the buffalo blue cheese variety that has become a hot seller.

When temperatures reach 70 degrees and over, the cart sells popcorn, lemonade, and sno-cones. "If it gets below 70 degrees, we don't sell a lot of popcorn on the Square," Roeming notes. "If kids aren't around, we won't sell a lot." The business no longer attends Art Fair on the Square or the Taste of Madison because it just didn't pan out financially to do so.

"I made a living with popcorn for a while and then my wife and I operated a popcorn and sub shop on Cottage Grove Road for nine years," Roeming notes. "I'm lucky in that I don't need or live on the popcorn income anymore."

"I do it because I really enjoy it. I do it for the customers who keep visiting. It doesn't really pay for me to stay up there, but I just love running it."

"And I love popcorn." ■