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Hot dog of an idea!

Couple keeps it cool with ice cream hot dog dessert.

By Jill Lerner, Journal Staff Writer

CONCORD -- Isaac Newton had his falling apple. For Peter Franklin, it was a steaming hot dog.

When he laid eyes, in 1997, upon the self-serve hot dog steamer at his local deli, Franklin saw more than the fats, fillers, and usual unmentionables associated with the ballpark treat.

Rather, the aspiring entrepreneur saw a means to achieve his goal of developing a customizable food product.

Over the next two years, Franklin and his wife, Tara, worked tirelessly to achieve their dream, quitting full-time jobs and sacrificing their living room to the cause.

It all paid off this past summer, when thousands of patrons at New Hampshire's Storyland amusement park bit into what its creators hope is the next big thing in frozen treats -- the ice cream hot dog known as the COOL DOG ®.

The COOL DOG, a "hot dog" of ice cream placed inside a sponge cake "bun" with a choice of toppings, is also served at Dick's Last Resort restaurant in Boston.

There were times, though when it seemed as if COOL DOG might be permanently frozen in its tracks.

Peter conceived of the idea for the company while working as Director of Marketing for Quantum Corp., a California-based high-technology company. Constant travel, much of it international, had taken its toll, and he was looking to spend more time at home. Peter had always wanted to start his own business -- ideally, an enterprise that required little in the way of labor costs. Then he encountered the hot dog steamer.

"I walked over to the steamer, and there was the squirt bottle, relish, mustard, and I grabbed a bun," recalled Peter, 50. "I thought, wow, that's a custom product. I got exactly what I wanted and there was no labor involved. I wonder why we can't do that."

Peter, who had earlier conceived of another custom ice cream business that didn't pan out, knew what food product he wanted for the "hot dog."

It wasn't a tough sell.

"He decided ice cream would be fun, and of course, I didn't disagree because I love ice cream," said Tara, 43, who worked as a publicist for physicians before both she and her husband quit their jobs in 1999 to devote all of their time to COOL DOG.

The more difficult part was actually creating the product. For the bun, ladyfingers didn't work out, pound cake proved too thick, and angel cake was nearly impossible to work with.

Sponge cake, the eventual choice, was "light and fluffy and pliable," said Tara, though it, too, had its own challenges. It often stuck to the pan.

Even stickier, though, was the matter of how to mold ice cream into the appropriate shape. Peter toiled with homemade molds of all shapes and sizes in the family basement trying to prove wrong the countless ice cream industry experts who told him it was impossible to mass produce ice cream in the shape of a hot dog. He eventually devised a patent-pending process to do it.

"We were eating a lot of ice cream," Tara recalled.

In the Fall of 2000, with COOL DOGs in tow, the Franklins hitched a trailer to the family car and headed to Atlanta for the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions convention.

Despite its relative obscurity in one of the last booths in the convention hall, the COOL DOG was an enormous hit. The ice cream novelty garnered attention from television news crews, including Fox and CNBC. More significantly, there were orders -- the biggest of which came from Storyland for more than 10,000 COOL DOGs.

In the meantime, the Franklins had already signed up Dick's Last Resort as the company's first commercial customer.

All was going great until Wilbraham-based Friendly Ice Cream Corp., which had agreed to co-pack the COOL DOG ice cream, dropped the Franklins as a customer on the first day of summer. As a result, on their last COOL DOG run at Friendly's, the Franklins just kept turning out ice cream. They had to hire their son's high school friends to assemble the treats around the clock, but eventually were able to fulfill their commitment to the amusement park -- to the delight of the park's food coordinator.

"We sold a ton of them," said Storyland's Bud Selmi, who said the COOL DOGs were "very, very popular."

Gabe Nicolella, general manager for Dick's Last Resort, said his patrons also love the treats because the self-contained dessert is easy to serve.

The Franklins recently hooked up with a new co-packer, and produced 31,000 COOL DOGs last month. The company, which has been based in the couple's living room, will soon move to 6,000 square feet of office and assembly space in Shirley, MA. With stock now on hand, the couple says the next challenge is to get their product into sports parks such as Fenway.

"That's the plan," said Peter. "That is," he said laughing, "if all goes according to plan -- which is never does."