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Dog Days, Hot and Cold

Shirley confection a big hit at Fenway

SHIRLEY - Next time Peter and Tara Franklin see Red Sox broadcaster Jerry Remy, they'll hug him.

During a rain delay at Fenway Park this month, Remy got hold of the Franklins' creation, an ice-cream-and-sponge-cake concoction given the name "COOL DOG."

Remy caressed and lapped the 5-inch vanilla ice cream "hot dog" nestled in a sponge cake "bun," smothered in whipped cream and hot fudge. When it was gone, he smacked his lips, happy as a dog at the Alpo factory.

"They're absolutely fabulous," Remy told The Sun in a statement.

The brief love affair was displayed live on TV. "You can't buy that kind of advertising," said Tara, 43, who laughed as she and her husband described the COOL DOG's roller coaster ride to new heights. She and (her husband) Peter, 50, have worked doggedly on the product for three years, and for their dream, even left their jobs -- hers as a physician's publicist and his for the high-tech Quantum Corporation.

"It's been like a rocket -- straight up, then straight down until our nose was touching the grass, and then straight up again," Peter said during an interview at the COOL DOG headquarters in the newly-renovated former Samson Cordage rope factory.

Getting Fenway to accept the COOL DOG was a coup. After making a cold call, they persuaded officials of the Red Sox and Aramark, the company handling Fenway's concessions, to taste the COOL DOG.

Despite Aramark's reputation for being selective, even leery of new products, it quickly agreed to add the COOL DOG to Fenway's menu.

"The COOL DOG is doing very well right now," said Rich Roper, vice president of concessions for Aramark. "It's a good alternative."

Roper predicted that the new snack would not replace Hood soft ice cream as the "big mover" among frozen treats at Fenway, but seemed to think the COOL DOG had a bright future at the ballpark.

"I think the kids are really going to like it in the summertime," Roper said. "As nasty as the weather's been, I think the reception has been very good by the public."

"Aramark brought COOL DOGs up to the press box a few weeks ago and it went over well," said one Red Sox official.

Red Sox spokesman Kevin Shea said the Franklins benefited in part from a policy that promotes local vendors.

So far, some 6,000 COOL DOGs were sold in the first nine home games. That's roughly 720 dogs a game, an allotment so short of meeting demand that they sold out by the fourth inning.

"Everyone tried to get more. Then it turned 80 degrees and the lines for COOL DOGs were longer than the beer lines," Tara said.

For a while, it seemed the Franklins were barking up the wrong tree. Friendly's, the company that was packing the ice cream, abruptly bowed out last summer, and a venture capitalist "jerked us around," said Peter.

The couple nearly went broke. They had sunk \$400,000 of their own money into research and production and raised another \$560,000 from relatives and venture-capital money.

For two years, the family drew no income and barely paid its bills. This spring, "We were this close to closing the doors," said Tara, measuring a half-inch with her fingers.

But in March another venture-capital investment came through, followed by Fenway's approval, which instantly boosted the COOL DOGs status in the eyes of other potential sellers.

"It's been wild ever since," said Peter, adding that now, instead of bills, everyone sends in checks."

The Franklins -- both lithe despite lots of product-testing the last few years -- this week pitched their product at the Meadowlands sports complex in New Jersey. They've already signed contracts with Dick's Last Resort restaurant in Boston -- their first commercial customer -- the Fleet Center and Six Flags amusement parks.

They've got a million COOL DOGs in 20-degree-below freezers ready for shipment.

The COOL DOG may seem simple, but its development was anything but. After studying hot dogs and Dell computers, Peter decided early on that customers respond to products that can be "customized."

For COOL DOGs, this means the customer's choice of adding whipped cream, fudge, sprinkles, M&Ms and other toppings at hand.

"I provide the platform. They create the product," Peter said.

The trick was shaping the ice cream into a hot dog shape, complete with authentically wrinkled ends.

Ice cream is either too hard to carve or too soft to work with. The Franklins had to develop a new molding process, one without wood sticks.

The wood sticks inserted into many ice cream products exist not only for the customer's grip, but also as part of the molding process. His patent-pending process involves removable steel pins.

The Franklins declined a request to let a reporter observe the production process.

For every hurdle cleared, another presents itself.

The COOL DOG has been sold from four refrigerated carts stationed in the park's main concession area under the stands.

To attain the desirable goal of hawking COOL DOGs in the stands like popcorn and steamed hot dogs, they had to find a way to protect the whipped cream and other toppings, fudge and sprinkles as the COOL DOG is passed by hand from the vendor to the customer.

Peter devised what he calls -- naturally -- the "dog house" -- a cardboard sleeve into which the COOL DOG slides.

"That's what I love about this," said Peter. "It's constant problem-solving. No one's ever done this before."