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Concord residents' idea for COOL DOG[®] is having its day

By Betsy Levinson, Staff Writer

A homegrown success story is unfolding for Concord residents Peter and Tara Franklin.

It began one afternoon in 1997 when Peter stopped into the Nine Acre Corner Store for a snack, and was struck with an idea.

He bought a hot dog, squirted it with mustard, and stood there wondering why no one had invented an ice cream snack shaped like a frankfurter that one could eat on the fly.

The COOL DOG[®] was born.

Franklin's "dessert sundae" is a five-inch cylinder of premium hard ice cream nestled in a sponge cake "bun" that can be doctored up with hot fudge or butterscotch sauce condiments, whipped cream, and a cherry.

But turning his self-described "brilliant idea" into a product for national distribution has been an enormous challenge for the inventor.

Before COOL DOG[®], Franklin had a career in high tech as a software group developer. He worked at Digital Equipment Corporation until his division was sold to Quantum Computer, which moved its operation to California. He didn't stay with the company, and he searched for something else to develop, an idea that would use his skills in product development.

"But I wanted to have fun," said Franklin. "I wanted to apply my well-honed business principles to something more fun than disk drives."

He knew ice cream was a \$50 billion a year market world wide, so he thought about what he could make that was new and fun. A hand-held sundae, he wondered as he paid for his hot dog.

Now the living room in Franklin's home is filled to capacity with desks, filing cabinets, and assorted tables and chairs. Books, pamphlets, and mail are piling up. COOL DOG[®] is proving to be an overnight sensation in the world of novelty foods, and Franklin is feeling his way into the big time.

"I thought it was a great idea at the time, but I also doubted myself because I hadn't worked hard at it," said Franklin. "It just came to me in a flash."

He called a patent attorney immediately. "I was embarrassed to tell the lawyer because I thought he'd think it was such a stupid idea," he said. He applied for his patent in April 1998.

The next challenge was making the thing.

"I tried Lady Fingers, pound cake, and angel food cake for the roll," said Franklin. "I made a spreadsheet of all the various cake recipes I could find at the library, and compared them."

Batch after batch turned out either too hard or too soft, crumbling when he tried to fold it, or too thick to manipulate. He tried a brownie recipe, but it was too dense and rich to complement the ice cream.

Finally he settled on a thin sponge cake that he folds in three sections to hold the ice cream. It is pliable enough to bend, but doesn't break apart.

The ice cream proved more difficult. Franklin said he discovered it was impossible to make ice cream that was rounded at both ends. Molded cylinders were flat on one side. It took him a year and a half to arrive at the secret design that produces the COOL DOG[®].

The Franklins decided to test the success of their prototype. They drove to Atlanta two years ago to attend a food-oriented trade show. They drove down Route 95 with their COOL DOG[®] cart in the back of their van. They stayed with friends, not having the funds for a hotel.

"We were overwhelmed at the response," said Franklin. He said there were 1,300 exhibitors, and 40,000 buyers. The exhibition hall had 9 miles of halls.

At a similar trade show in Orlando two weeks ago, the Franklins were mobbed.

"We were on local television five times. We taped a segment for the Food Channel, and we'll be on CNBC. It was unbelievable."

Franklin's problem became how to fill the deluge of orders, since he had no equipment to make COOL DOG[®]s in bulk.

"I needed to make 3,000 a day, and we could get maybe 75."

Fast-forward to late November, and Franklin is planning to open a large-scale production facility in Shirley, MA. He said he'll be able to make 20,000 a day come January. He is designing an individual wrapping for a single COOL DOG[®], and has requests from ballparks and amusement parks all over the country.

But the big guys can wait. Franklin said his first orders will be filled locally. Early next year, he hopes to have COOL DOG[®]s available at Verrill Farm, the West Concord Supermarket, and of course, the Nine Acre Corner Store where it all began.