

479° Degrees Popcorn is Hot

By Tamara Palmer in Sweet Beat

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479° Degrees Fleur de Sel Caramel popcorn was an impulse buy one night when I felt like having a blind date with a new snack. I have a healthy suspicion of the quality of packaged popcorn, but something about 479's presentation in combination with the touting of organic ingredients appealed.

A few weeks later, I went all the way with the Madras Curry Coconut. After inhaling the entire box in one setting (not recommended), I had to find out more about this San Francisco-based company.

Turns out, 479 is a new creation popped by Jean Arnold, who first nurtured the inkling of a professional passion for food when she squeezed in cooking classes at Le Cordon Bleu in between law classes in London. After stints working for Goldman Sachs and on the e-commerce team at Yahoo! and running a small physical therapy clinic with her husband, Arnold has put her business acumen towards food and now spends 20-plus hours a week making her artisan popcorn. While pregnant!

Currently self-distributed locally at stores such as Bi-Rite, Blue Fog, Rainbow and Draegar's, Arnold relied heavily on feedback from in-store taste tests before narrowing a wide variety of ideas down to eight flavors. She found that, rather than a clear favorite or two, people liked many different flavors, and not just the most predictable to someone's palate.

(Left to right: Ginger Sesame Caramel, Chipotle Caramel Almond, Fleur de Sel Caramel, Madras Curry Coconut, Black Truffle + Cheddar. Not pictured: Vietnamese Cinnamon, Pimenton de La Vera, Alderwood Smoked Salt)



That's true in my case: My sweet tooth rages almost constantly, but the Black Truffle + White Cheddar is a surprise favorite; the 'shroom comes through strong, and the cheddar is far superior to any other cheese corn I've tried.

What makes these good across the board, though, is the crunch of the popcorn itself, an heirloom variety grown on a small family farm in Sacramento. It really highlights the flaccidity of most brands.

"Conventional popcorn, for the last 60 or 70 years, has been bred by companies like Orville Redenbacher to pop really big, so it fills the bag with less kernels, and taste like nothing, so then when they put artificial butter and flavor on top, the corny flavor doesn't interfere," she explains. "Basically everything that we get out there is like a spongy nothing! So when I started to research this and started ordering and comparing various heirloom popcorn from around the country, I really learned a lot about it and thought that maybe other people would have a taste for it, too." Arnold also uses local ingredients (like dairy from Straus Family Creamery) whenever possible and makes her own spice blends instead of relying on the wild card of commercial products.

One of the freshest ideas we discussed is that Arnold likes to pair her popcorn with wine and appetizers at dinner parties; she offers a few interesting suggestions.

"I can see the Madras Coconut Curry served with a thin slice of prosciutto with a light Gewürztraminer," she says. "The Black Truffle + Cheddar works with a slice of ripe pear and a glass of Pinot Noir. And for dessert, French vanilla ice cream topped with some of our Fleur de Sel Caramel corn."