



Five questions for a popcorn maven

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She's lived all over the world, studied at Cambridge University and Cordon Bleu, so of course she ended up in the field of . . . popcorn.

Now in San Francisco, Jean Arnold and husband Andy this fall launched 479° Popcorn, which sells popped corn flavored with gourmet ingredients such as black truffle, fleur de sel and Vietnamese cinnamon. It's available at retailers including Draeger's and through the Web site www.479popcorn.com. (The name? It refers to the optimal popping temperature.)

Why popcorn? "I'm a self-described popcorn addict. I grew up with it, I ate it every day. And when I came back to the United States I realized popcorn here doesn't taste very good. . . . So I started searching for good popcorn and adding ingredients that I liked. And when my friends got excited about it, I thought maybe I have something here."

Was it hard to find the right corn? "In the United States, popcorn has been bred to be big, but it tastes like nothing. It was really difficult to find local farmers that were growing the heirloom organic popcorn I had found in other parts of the world. Finally, I found two family farmers near Sacramento, who were growing organic way before it became fashionable. We may end up selling unpopcorned corn, too, to pop at home. I eat it with just salt and butter, and it tastes great."

How do you pop it for 479°? "In really large copper kettles. Each batch is maybe six or seven gallons."

And what do you recommend at home? "I personally like two methods. The first is the stovetop, hand-cranked popper. The trick with that is getting the heat just right. It has to be over 400 degrees, but you don't want the popcorn to scorch. And then there's the agitation: Stirring is key, key, key."

"Otherwise, I like the West Bend Stir Crazy. There are no adjustments, you just plug it in and it gets hotter and hotter. So first you have to let it get hot enough, and you also need to remember to lift the dome when it starts popping."

Do you have any new flavors in the works? "Bacon - maple bacon. When I make it and serve it right away, it's great. But I need to figure out how to get it in a dry form that sustains the flavor. And the other is brown butter. Those are two flavors I really, really want."