

THE POPCORN KING



of Yadkin Valley

By Carla Burgess

After Hurricane Hugo blew through the western Piedmont in September 1989, Cas Booe could barely walk among the mature cornstalks on his Yadkinville popcorn farm, let alone drive a combine through to harvest it. So he tested an idea. He hand-picked a few ears from the prostrate stalks, took them into the house and put a whole ear into the microwave. The kernels popped. Popcorn-on-the-cob.

With the help of an exporter that fall, Booe (pronounced “boo”) found a market in Japan for popcorn-on-the-cob. In the meantime, his grandfather picked sacks of ears to sell locally. The Booes managed to salvage some of their crop while cultivating a new specialty market overseas.

Today, Cas Booe, 36, sells his Yadkin Valley Popcorn all over the globe—on the cob, unpopped or already-popped and seasoned. It’s sold ready-to-eat in gourmet tins and pillow-sized plastic bags and ready-to-pop in 1-ton sacks that are forklifted onto trucks bound for wholesalers. You can go into a Winn Dixie or a Lowes Foods and find Yadkin Valley Popcorn.

Shallowford Farms had a modest beginning in 1987—an experiment to grow popcorn on 50 acres of family farmland. At the time, Booe was earning a bachelor’s degree in crop science from North Carolina State University. By his graduation in 1990, he’d invested in the equipment to process corn. In 1997, Booe bought poppers, conveyors and other gear to pop the corn and

package it, making Shallowford Farms a one-stop pop shop.

Shallowford Farms sells popcorn in nearly every shape, flavor and color—including cheese, grape, jalapeno, green apple and butter rum.

The company’s cheese flavor has won a national “best popcorn” award. But Booe and his wife, Mandy, 34, say the “better butter” is their favorite. Marketed as “movie popcorn,” the seasoning is a secret formula created exclusively for the Shallowford Farms.

Growing and processing popcorn

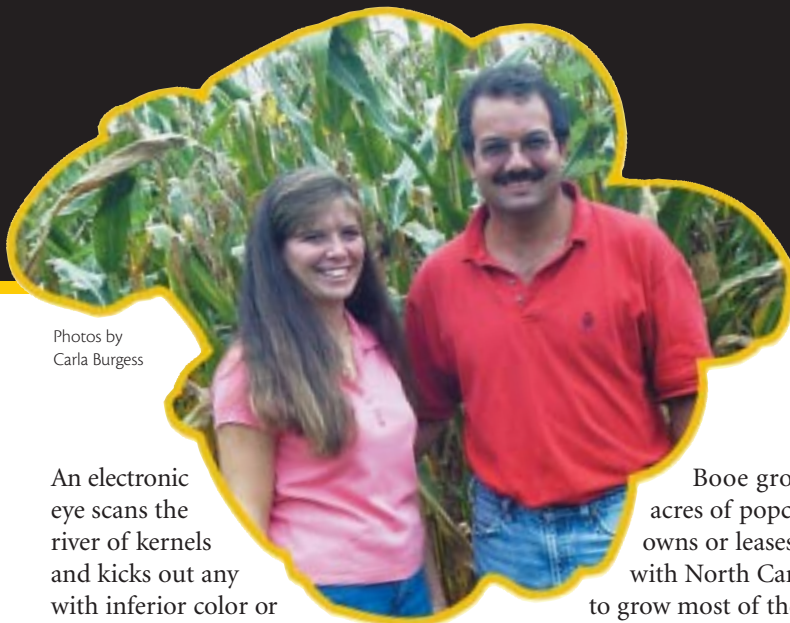
On a catwalk high in the plant, the air outside the poppers is hot and dry, permeated by a buttery mist. Each of the two hot-air poppers can pop 650 pounds of kernels in an hour. Unpopped kernels, called “old maids,” are expelled. The popped corn is ejected into a rotating tumbler where the seasonings are applied. Then the fluffy snack goes up a conveyor, into a sorting bin and down through chutes. Several workers catch the still-warm corn in plastic bags, which they seal immediately and stack into shipping boxes.

At the other end of the plant, floor-to-ceiling equipment conveys tons of kernels into the building from the row of outdoor storage bins. The noise of the machinery is like water falling from a massive dam, and the air is a spray of dust.

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A fourth-generation Yadkinville farm ships popcorn throughout the world



Photos by
Carla Burgess

An electronic eye scans the river of kernels and kicks out any with inferior color or texture. The incoming grain has been cured and conditioned so that it contains the ideal moisture content for popping.

It's the water inside the kernel that separates popcorn from field corn—a droplet encircled with soft starch inside a hard outer coating. When heated to about 400 degrees, the water turns to steam, expands and ruptures the wall—in effect turning the kernel inside out and cooking the starch into a pillowy, edible treat.

There are two types of popcorn, named for their shape: snowflake and mushroom. Snowflake, with its ragged edges, is the kind served in movie theaters and sold to consumers. The mushroom kernel “balls up” when it pops, says Booe. Its relatively uniform surface makes mushroom popcorn ideal for caramel or candy coating.

Booe guesses the company sells about 20 percent of its product already popped. Most all the corn leaves the plant on the same day it is popped. “We like to get it straight from the popper to the truck,” he says, adding that the shelf life of popped product is about 90 days.

Above, from left: Surry-Yadkin EMC members Cas and Mandy Booe grow their corn at Shallowford Farms and then ship the resulting popcorn all over the world.

You can purchase Yadkin Valley Popcorn from your local Lowes or Winn Dixie.

Cas displays a product from his farm's on-site store where tourists can purchase fresh popcorn and paraphernalia, like T-shirts, hats and more.



Booe grows about 700 acres of popcorn on land he owns or leases. He contracts with North Carolina farmers to grow most of the remainder of the corn the company processes. In addition, he also employs 15 people full-time

not just North Carolina but in the southeastern United States. The biggest popcorn-growing states are Nebraska and Indiana, and the nearest processors are Kentucky, Pennsylvania and southern Indiana. There are only 19 major processors in the country, according to the latest Census of Agriculture (1997). Those include processors that handle more than 4 million pounds of popcorn a year, and Booe is one of them.

Marketing the Popcorn King

“You’re looking at the popcorn king of the Southeast,” says Shallowford’s marketing director Jeff Leonard, grinning and motioning toward his old friend. Leonard, former president of Foltz Concrete Pipe Co. and owner of Pipeline Motorsports, has used his racing connections as a marketing tool to increase name-brand awareness for Booe’s popcorn in the South. Leonard’s stepson, Zach Brewer, drives the Yadkin Valley Popcorn Pontiac. Leonard also courted chains of supermarkets—Ingles, Winn Dixie, Lowes Foods and Publix—to sell the company’s gourmet popped corn in store delis.

“They like the fact that we don’t just make the product and then just ship it,” says Leonard. “We get the consumer’s attention. We set up the racecar in the parking lots of supermarkets. Consumers come by to see the car, meet Zach, get an autograph and sample the popcorn.”

Shallowford Farms is also getting piggyback attention from the federally designated Yadkin Valley Wine Trail—a collection of wineries and vineyards scattered among historical sites in the Piedmont. The farm has an on-site store where tourists can purchase fresh popcorn and paraphernalia, along with T-shirts,



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at the plant. Shallowford Farms was a charter member of Goodness Grows in North Carolina, an agriculture marketing program that raises awareness about top-quality products grown, processed or manufactured here.

North Carolina is a ways off the beaten path of the Corn Belt in the Midwest, where most popcorn is grown. But the conditions are just as favorable here, says Booe.

“It’s a good crop,” he says. “Popcorn doesn’t require as much fertilizer and arguably not as much water.”

Until Booe got rolling, processing also was a novelty in this region too—

hats, gift baskets and decorative tins (with college and professional sports team themes and, of course, NASCAR) and other souvenirs.

The farm itself is part of the important agricultural heritage of the region. It was the site of the first grade A dairy in Yadkin County, built by Booe's great-grandfather to service the historic Biltmore Dairy Farms in Asheville. Booe's grandfather continued in the dairy business, but farming skipped a generation with Booe's father, who pursued a career in snack food distribution. So it seems fitting that Caswell Booe III melded the two interests to make his fortune.

The youngest Booe collected his first profit as a farmer at age 11. He sold a truckload of his homegrown watermelons to the K&W Cafeteria in nearby Winston-Salem. He needed his father to drive him there. But Cas went inside and made the pitch to the manager himself, who "couldn't say no to a little kid." He left about \$400 richer and continued growing watermelons, cantaloupes and pumpkins as a summer pastime.

Booe's hobby taught him the value of diversifying. In addition to full-circle popcorn production, the company is involved in branding of products and distribution of a variety of snack foods, including Bickel's potato chips.

Still, the "popcorn king" hasn't gotten too big for his tractor seat. For him, working in the open air is still one of the most enjoyable parts of the business. In June, Booe and one other person planted 500 acres of corn in a grueling eight days straight. He recalls it with a mix of fondness and awe. The harvest keeps him busy September through Thanksgiving. It's a satisfying yield for someone who began with a few kernels of initiative.

Freelancer Carla Burgess wrote about Hyde County's Mattamuskeet Sweet onions in the June 2003 Carolina Country.

Tour information

To schedule a tour for 10 or more people, call (336) 463-5938. Tours are available year-round between 9 a.m. and 11:30 a.m. Cost is \$3 per person. Each guest receives a bag of freshly popped corn at the end of the tour.

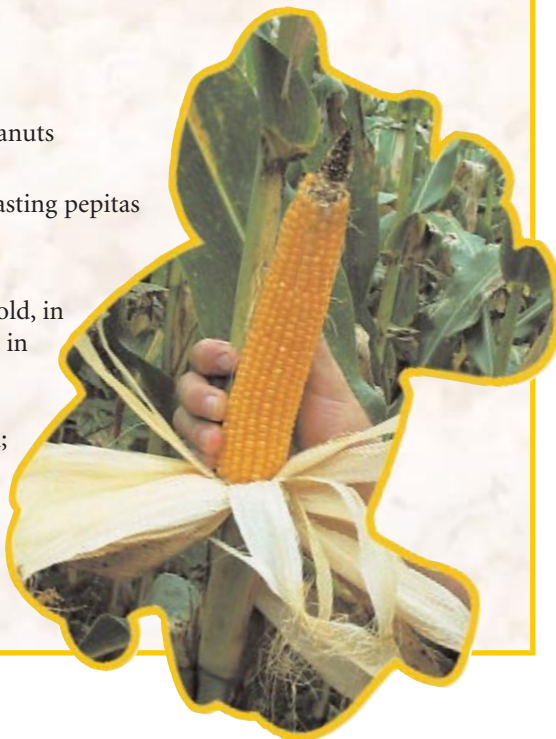


Chili Corn

- 4 quarts popped popcorn
- 3 small dried red chilies
- 1 package (6 3/4 ounce) peanuts
- 6 tablespoons margarine
- 1 package (3 1/4 ounce) roasting pepitas (little peppers)
- 3/4 teaspoon garlic salt

Heat popped popcorn, if it is cold, in oven. Cook chilies and peanuts in margarine over low heat for 5 minutes; remove chilies. Add pepitas and pour over hot corn; season with garlic.

—Recipe from the U.S. Popcorn Board, www.popcorn.org



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