

Hanover, PA: Snack Capital of the Chesapeake?

by Lori Baer

The small town of Hanover, Pennsylvania, approximately 50 miles northwest of Baltimore, might seem an unlikely place to house not just one, but two nationally known snack food companies. But when you consider that, in the early 1900s, entrepreneurial snack makers from this farming community enjoyed easy access to locally available crops—

which made starting one's own chip or pretzel company a fairly inexpensive way to get into business—it's not so unlikely after all.

Today, Snyder's of Hanover and Utz Quality Foods, founded in 1909 and 1921, respectively, maintain their Pennsylvania footing yet extend their reach to national and international markets, giving the Chesapeake region two major hometown snack heroes.

The tradition of baking soft pretzels was brought to Southeastern Pennsylvania by German immigrants, and the country's first commercial pretzel bakery was founded in 1861 in Lititz, in Lancaster County. Pretzel lore holds that a local baker's apprentice once dozed off while baking soft pretzels and woke in a panic to see that the hearth's fire had died down. Believing the pretzels had not been baked long enough, he fired the furnace again, baking them twice as long. The master baker was furious over the ruined pretzels, but curiously tasted them anyway. Much to his surprise, they were crisp, crunchy and delicious. He also discovered the new hard pretzel retained its freshness much longer than traditional soft pretzels. And the rest, as they say, is history.

That history manifested itself in Snyder's famous pretzels when the company, which had been producing pretzels since 1909, acquired another local bakery, the Bechtel Pretzel Company, in 1963. It was Bill Bechtel who developed the original recipe for the sourdough hard pretzel that's still used today.

"Snyder's of Hanover became a major national snack food company because of the success of their Sourdough Pretzel," said Claude O'Connor, Snyder's vice president of marketing. "Currently, Snyder's Sourdough Pretzel is No. 1 in the Baltimore/D.C. region."

O'Connor adds that "the history of the company, its family heritage, and the fact that the management is all focused and located here in Central Pennsylvania help keep our roots in perspective."

What pretzels are to Snyder's, potato chips are to Utz Quality Foods.

Bill and Salie Utz started their potato chip business in 1921, cooking up about 50 pounds of chips per hour behind their Hanover summer house. The popularity of their Hanover Home Brand chips grew into a business that today produces 14,000 potato chips per hour, amounting to over a million pounds of chips per week.

Potato chips remain at the heart of Utz's success. The company's Pennsylvania Dutch roots served its earlier recipes, and Grandma Utz Handcooked Potato Chips taste just like Bill and Salie's original, using slightly thicker, un-rinsed potato slices that are kettle-cooked in lard in small batches. Utz's snack line



Bill & Salie Utz

Photos courtesy of Snyder's and Utz



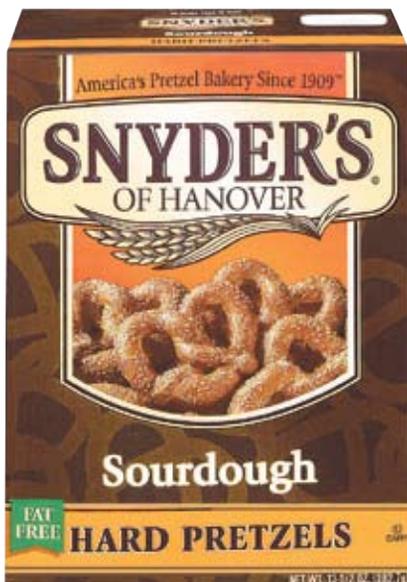
has expanded greatly since its beginnings—even to include The Crab Chip made with Chesapeake Bay crab seasoning.

“One of our biggest markets and most successful is Baltimore,” says Tom Dempsey, president of Utz Quality Foods. “Many generations have enjoyed steamed crabs, Utz chips and Natty Boh beer. We thought the flavor would be a winner there in Baltimore, but you’d be amazed at what a following it has in some of the other geographical areas that we distribute in.”

Dempsey adds that Hanover is not a large town, so seeing the Utz name in different regions and settings all across the United States fosters a sense of pride. All of Utz’s manufacturing plants are in the Hanover area and the company has second and third generation employees in its workforce.

The hardworking German immigrants who founded Hanover had a taste for salty snacks and a strong entrepreneurial spirit that began a tradition of snacking that remains rooted deep in the community. Both Snyder’s and Utz are an integral part of the community, positioning Hanover as a national player in the snack food industry while still catering to the region’s residents with the crunchy munchies they crave.

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