

Pronto Pups

By Jim Scheppke

A Pronto Pup is a popular fast food invented in Oregon and marketed nationwide, beginning in the 1940s. It consists of a hot dog impaled on a stick and deep-fried after being dipped in a cornmeal-based batter. Pronto Pups were the brainchild of George Boyington, who founded a successful Oregon company that is still operating today.

George Boyington, born in Galt, Iowa, in 1902, was a bootlegger during Prohibition who smuggled liquor from Canada into Michigan. By the late 1930s, he had gone straight and moved to Salem, Oregon, to work for a car dealer. He married Versa Beugli, and together they operated a hot dog stand during the summer behind the Rockaway Beach Natatorium.

Boyington told two origin stories about the Pronto Pup. One story goes like this: On Labor Day 1939, poor weather kept customers away from his stand in Rockaway Beach, leaving him with an oversupply of buns that he ended up feeding to the seagulls. To eliminate having such waste again, he experimented with making what he called a “wiener dun in a bun.” Another story involved an experience at a county fair when his hot dog fell out of the bun, getting mustard all over his slacks. He determined that the problem would be prevented by frying a hot dog in batter, creating a “non-skid hot dog.”

By 1941, the Boyingtons had opened a Pronto Pup stand at Sandy Boulevard and Southeast Thirtieth Avenue in Portland. That September, over fifteen thousand Pronto Pups were sold at the Pacific International Livestock Exposition. A few months later, on April 23, 1942, trademark #1517348 was registered for the Pronto Pup deep fried hot dog, and the Boyingtons began selling franchises. George worked with Centennial Mills in Portland to produce the proprietary batter mix—cornmeal, wheat flour, rice flour, and a few other ingredients—and franchisees had to agree to purchase and use the mix exclusively and to serve Pronto Pups plain or with mustard only (no ketchup).

Pronto Pups were a huge success. During the 1940s, Boyington sold franchises throughout the country, including to returning GIs looking for a small business start-up. One of the most successful franchisees was Jack Karnis, who ate his first Pronto Pup after he was discharged from the Merchant Marines in Portland. He bought one of the first franchises, which he opened in Chicago. In 1947, he took Pronto Pups to the Minnesota State Fair, setting off a craze that continues to this day—the Karnis family operates eight Pronto Pup stands throughout the fairgrounds and goes through thirty-six tons of dogs and well over a hundred tons of batter during an average twelve-day fair.

In 1947, George Boyington hosted forty delegates from around the country at the first Pronto Pups National Distributors Association meeting in Chicago. Three years later, in 1950, he sold the business to his attorney, Alfred Sulmonetti, and his brother Alex. The Boyingtons later moved from Oswego (present-day Lake Oswego) to California and then to Ilwaco, Washington, where George died in 1979.

While some purveyors of Pronto Pups, including those at the Minnesota State Fair, want to claim that the Pronto Pup is “America’s original corn dog,” that honor is probably undeserved. In 1924, Francis Matson obtained a patent on an appliance designed to “provide an edible food product...having the enclosed casing of baked batter,” and in 1929 a wholesale catalog offered a cast iron “Krusty Korn Sausage Dog Pan.” Stanley Jenkins was granted a patent in 1929 for a device to prepare food “such as wieners...impaled on sticks and dipped in a batter...then deep fried in a vegetable oil.” Ten years later, a columnist wrote about a restaurant in Dallas that served “one of their home-town delicacies ‘the corn dog’ which is a frankfurter baked in corn bread.” Another contender for “America’s Original Corndog” was the Corny Dog, created by brothers Carl and Neil Fletcher, which debuted at the Texas State Fair in 1942.

In 2016, the Original Pronto Pup stand opened in Rockaway Beach, in honor of the birthplace of George Boyington’s invention. It features a large fiberglass Pronto Pup on the roof and a mechanical Pronto Pup with a saddle that visitors can ride. In Oregon, Pronto Pups can also be

found at original franchise locations in Otis and Seaside. As of 2024, the Sulmonetti family still owned the business, which has company offices in Portland.

Sources

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