

Dunnellon Entrepreneur Markets BBQ Sauce

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Ocala STAR-BANNER

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OCALA - Derrell Croft is a blue jeans and a short-sleeved shirt kind of guy. He's an everyman from Dunnellon, a 63-year-old utility worker who talks with a Southern drawl only a Florida native could possess.

He's also a genius, an artist really. But his masterpieces can be bought in four bottles for about four bucks.

Croft created a barbecue sauce 14 years ago, a sauce that he gave away in pint jars to his family and friends. Now, if he has it his way, you will soon find it in places like Publix and Winn-Dixie next to names like Heinz and Hellmann's.

"This lady in Dunnellon told me a few years ago it was about time I stopped giving this stuff away," Croft said, grinning a bit. "We started finding out what it would take to do a mass production of it."

Soon, Croft Farmhouse BBQ Sauce was born. After his original recipe, he created a hot version, then one basted in bourbon. All three, he says, are tomato based. He also made a mustard-based South Carolina style sauce.

All four, Croft said, have about 20 ingredients in them.

"It's a lot of tomato, mustard, celery and molasses," he said. "There may be a secret ingredient or two." What are they? "Well," he grins again. "It's a secret." The Crofts started selling their sauce by the jar at a flea market in North Carolina where they lived. They made each batch from their kitchen, but they could never make enough to meet the demand.

"We'd cook it all up and sell it real quick," Lois said. "We'd make more and more, and they'd like it more and more, and then we'd make more and more."

After moving back to Dunnellon, the Crofts wanted to keep selling their sauce.

"We found out we couldn't legally do it at home," Derrell said.

Enter Prima Foods. The Ocala-based company specializes in creating all kinds of sauces created by locals.

"He came to us, and we tried his original sauce. And it was incredible," Prima owner Celeste Viale said.

"We recognized that this was a really good product, a product we thought could grow."

Croft now has his products in 15 local stores, including Quality Discount Meats in Ocala.

"I tell you, it's not a bad sauce. Actually, it's pretty good," said Mike Smith of Croft's sauce as he wrapped up freshly ground cube steaks. "We have people who come in, try it, like it, and they come back again and again."

Viale says customers aren't just putting it on their barbecue.



"It's great on things like cheese sticks, tuna, really anything," she said. "I have found that it makes a really good shrimp cocktail sauce."

Croft wants to get his sauce on the shelves of the big supermarkets, including the Winn-Dixie in Dunnellon where Lois works as a cashier.

"I'm trying to find out how to get it in our store," she said. "It's a hard process."

Croft wants to retire in a few years so he can focus entirely on his sauce. He still tinkers in his kitchen all the time trying to create his next masterpiece.

"When he likes one he makes, you can bet it's a good sauce," Lois said.

"He's got the best taste buds of anyone I've ever met."