

Potatoes, Serendipity, and a Little Luck

Virginia Potato Chipper Takes Road Less Traveled ...
and Takes Pride in Being a Small Fry!

BY SARA HUNT



Route 11 Potato Chip's roots go back to the mid 1980s after Sarah Cohen's father, Edward, started a nearby organic farm to supply fresh produce for the family restaurant. When a neighboring farmer ended up with a field full of potatoes and the expected buyer fell through, Cohen bought the whole lot of them and made potato chips to serve at his restaurant. Customers loved the chips, and their popularity led Cohen to open a small chip factory that ultimately became Route 11 Potato Chips.

The two-person business first opened its doors in the Shenandoah Valley in 1992 along the winding road that became its namesake. The quaint original location in Middletown offered visitors the opportunity to watch the cooking process through a big window. "It's how we enticed people to come out to buy our chips over the counter," says founder Sarah Cohen. And it's a tradition that she's continued in the company's new state-of-the-art facility down the road a piece in Mount Jackson. Cohen says, "It's a rare opportunity to actually see where food comes from."

The new Route 11 facility—opened two years ago in June—is more automated and efficient, but chips are still handmade the old fashioned way. Cohen says their kettle-style cook method may be much more labor intensive than her big-name competitors' continuous fry process, but the end result is a truly delicious potato chip, that's absolutely worth all the effort.

Recipe for Success

Every Route 11 potato chip starts with four simple ingredients: potatoes, oil, salt, and, of course, a dash of secret seasonings. "It's a simple product, with a lot of variables," says Cohen. Flavors include premium versions of traditional favorites like Lightly Salted, Sour Cream-n-Chive, and Barbeque, but they spice things up with unique trademark varieties such as Dill Pickle, Chesapeake Crab, and Mama Zuma's Habanero.

Contrary to common belief, potato chips are not made from conventional russet bakers. "We use potatoes grown especially for chip making," says Cohen. The company goes through the "chipping" potatoes load by load, based on demand. "One truckload of potatoes yields about three truckloads of chips."

Whenever possible they opt for Virginia grown spuds, but when production exceeds the supply available locally, they purchase potatoes from the same national suppliers that the big chippers use. August is the high season for local growers. Until then, they'll use potatoes from a supplier in Florida. "Some people don't know that potatoes grow in Florida, and that they're extra temperamental," but Florida potatoes make "beautiful and delicious potato chips." The Yukon gold special edition is made with West Virginia "organically" grown potatoes.



In the Bag—

Route 11's proof that variety IS the spice of life!

Dill Pickle—Any questions? We took those sassy, snappy, summer garden flavors you love and spread 'em just right over the crispy crunch that loves you. Kill two cravings with one chip.

Barbeque—A smoky-sweet throw-down. All natural spices blended with cane sugar juice and tomato-ey flavor. Ask the man with the orange fingertips. He knows.

Sour Cream-n-Chive—The real sour cream pulls the chip in one direction—kinda toward Mom's kitchen and steamy comfort food—and the zippy chive flavor pulls it back into the real world. They're a hug and a pinch. And you know you had both coming.

Chesapeake Crab—This is one of our favorites; a real taste of a place. We use the same special blend of finely ground peppers, salt and sugar that the watermen and restaurants spice their crabs with out on the Bay. Just like crabs, they're mo salty. And just like crabs, they go great with Orioles baseball, beer, sunburn, stuff like that. But even better than crabs, you can get 'em all year 'round.

Salt-N-Vinegar—No, they don't come wrapped in yesterday's newspaper. But then you don't have to watch out for bones either. Inspired by the robust, assertive flavors of real English fish and chips, these Yank chips have that perfect combination of cocky and cockney going on. They're in your mouth and in your face at the same time.

Sweet Potato-Lightly Salted—Anyone with a flowerbed knows that the sweet potato is not actually a potato; it's a member of the morning glory family. These chips do for your taste buds what morning glories do for that post holding up the mailbox. Bright, sweet, blossoms of sun-gold natural deliciousness popping out all over. A lot of people are surprised by the rich, complex flavor of these simple chips. The natural sugars in the sweet potato caramelize in the fryer,

so layer after layer of rich, fresh flavor reveals itself with each crunch. And Moms love 'em because they're ridiculously good for you. (1 oz. contains 120% of your RDA for vitamin A.)

Mama Zuma's Habanero (hot)—The problem is not that there are too many hot chips out there. The problem is that there aren't enough good hot chips out there. These muchachos get our special barbeque blend, along with a generous shake of dried habanero and chipotle powder. That first caliente kick will flat knock your hat in the creek. But the flavors all come together so brilliantly and happily upon the palate, you'll say, "thanks," and fetch it yourself.

Seasonal Flavor

Yukon Gold—If our chip menu was the Louvre, we would consider this particular beauty our Mona Lisa. Objects of rare and exquisite perfection, we only make them June through December. We only use Organically Grown Yukon Gold potatoes. And we only fry them in sunflower oil. (Along with having a light, bright flavor, the sunflower oil makes these chips good for you by being high in mono-unsaturated fats.) The Yukon Gold has a buttery richness all its own. Add to that a hint of sunflower and a dash of salt and it's all over but the swooning.

Simply Delicious!

Perhaps just as surprising as the simplicity of the product, is the simple cooking process. It takes about eight minutes to make a batch—from bin to bag. The first step in the process is peeling the potatoes. Peeled potatoes are then sliced into oil and kettle-cooked to golden crisp perfection for about six minutes.

Next, cooked chips ride along a conveyor belt and are hand sorted, then shuttled up a conveyor to the second floor, where each batch is hand seasoned, before being sent back down a chute to be bagged, boxed, and readied for shipping on the ground level.

"We make use of gravity to fill our bags for us," says Cohen of the seemingly simple yet still ingenious process. The most complicated segment in their journey is the form film machine, where big rolls of pre-printed packaging are transformed into the signature Route 11 bags and then filled with product.

"It's all about flow, raw materials, cooking, master flow," says Cohen. They're still tweaking the process, but it's much more efficient and streamlined than it used to be. "Mike helped get the business on track in 2002," she says of her business partner, Michael Connelly, an engineer with a military background. "You need someone who is maniacal about process and procedures."

Green Potato Chips

Cohen and Connelly are maybe most proud of their commitment to the numerous waste-free processes at their new chip factory. "Before, we were filling dumpsters with byproducts," says Connelly. "Now, it's a wholly organic product. Local farmers feed our potato peelings to their livestock," and one particularly well-fed cattle herd a half mile down the road receives a daily delivery of those cooked chips that don't quite pass the team's stringent quality standards.

Looking through the production window you can watch as employees hand sort the chips. Those that don't make the cut are tossed into a can for the lucky cows. They haven't been salted or seasoned, but they are fried and tasty. "They love them," laughs Cohen, "It gives new meaning to the concept of steak and potatoes." And to the phrase "cow chips."

Cohen says another byproduct, the used chip oil, is sold to the producers of high mineral blend horse feed. "We're told that horses eat with greater gusto when their feed is roasted in our seasoned oil." Even waste oil that is not suitable for eating is collected and sold for fuel. "The things we can do, we're doing right," she says. "It feels good to be able to do that."

In addition, all cardboard, metal, glass, and plastic they use in the process is recycled. The little trash they do produce is the

excess packaging. They even help heat the kitchen by recycling the steam that comes out of the cookers—potatoes are 75 percent water—so that's a lot of hot air!

"We designed and built the building with lots of green principles," says Connelly. One obvious feature is the use of natural light. Windows and skylights flood the kitchen and viewing area with sunlight. Most food production facilities have kitchens that never see the light of day. To top it off, they added a reflective roof. Connelly points out that each green decision also made good economic sense. "Doing it the right way, actually yielded savings," he says.

"It's been an integral part of the company's success," Connelly adds, "Economically, the margin is slim, so a penny saved is a penny earned." He said it just goes to show that sometimes you don't have to ramp up sales to increase profits, particularly during challenging economic times. "Just look right in front of you—simple changes can make all the difference."

Grass Roots Growth

Route 11 has had no private investors so the growth it has enjoyed has been a result of the company's own increased cash flow. Cohen adds, "This slow growth enabled us to lay the groundwork." Now the company has thirty-five employees, many of who commute thirty-five miles from their homes

near the original location to the new facility.

Originally located in an old feed store in Middletown, Cohen explains that the company name was inspired by the historic, though less infamous nearby Route 11. "It is the history equivalent to Route 66 but hasn't been romanticized," she explains. "Its use was more utilitarian as a deer trail before it became an Indian trail, running from Canada to New Orleans. It winds through old, little towns every five miles, each one a slice of Americana..." Just like her chips.

Interstate 81 was constructed parallel to Route 11 through many of the cities, although it generally bypasses the smaller towns.

The Great Valley Road of Virginia: Shenandoah Landscapes From Prehistory to the Present, a newly released book edited by Warren Hofstra and Karl Raitz, traces the road from its origins as a path for Native Americans, to its transformation to a wagon road for European settlers, to a paved Valley Turnpike and up to what it is now known as—Route 11.

Word of Mouth

With no sales staff, the company continues to rely on word of mouth advertising. "The product markets itself," says Cohen. "We've been so focused on making a good product. If you do that, a lot of the work has been done for you."

Cohen says the most popular flavor is the Route 11 Lightly Salted potato chips, followed by Barbeque. "Our lightly salted chips are old school, the real deal." They are the ultimate original potato chip. The most unusual flavor has got to be Dill Pickle, which incidentally has an online following of passionate fans.

Their specialty? "Our sweet potato chips separate us from all other chippers. Our sweet potatoes are grown organically on the eastern shore of Virginia. We use all his sweet potatoes till they're used up and then we seek out other suppliers."

Route 11 was one of the first two producers of sweet potato chips. Cohen says they first made sweet potato chips after one of their farmers suggested they try it. "After the first batch, I gained a new appreciation for what an incredible vegetable the sweet potato is. It's so underutilized in our culture. I was blown away—the sweet potato is shocking, just gorgeous."

Small chippers like Cohen are better equipped to make sweet potato chips because the sweet potato is resistant to be industrialized. "It takes human finesse to grow sweet potatoes," she explains. "Like many foods not capable of being mass produced," Cohen speculates, "the sweet potato sort of fell by the wayside."

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Route 11's seasonal Yukon Gold chips are also something special. Only made June through December due to availability of the specially grown potatoes, "They are the best," Cohen contends. "We cook them like no one does." Mass-market competitors lack the real buttery flavor of Route 11's Yukon Gold. They'll start cooking (literally!) in late July or early August.

Cohen says it's a tough decision when they have to discontinue unpopular flavors. "It's like having to put a pet down," she says of the recent decision to discontinue Garlic and Herb, Green Chile, and the Sweet Potato chips seasoned with Cinnamon and Sugar (Lightly Salted Sweet Potato chips are still available). Additionally, according to the company's website, due to the high cost of the vegetables and oil, Route 11 has temporarily discontinued the production of their popular veggie chips. Regretfully, they report, they are taking an extended break from cooking them.

April (around Easter) officially kicks off chip season, which peaks in July and drops off after Labor Day. If you consider your own potato chip consumption habits (i.e. picnic season), there's no surprise there.

Cohen says the Route 11 chip factory makes a good food stop while out exploring Virginia wineries. "Our chips even pair well with Virginia wines." The factory is open Mon–Sat, 9am–5pm, but she suggests visitors always call ahead to find out the best time for fry viewing.

The facility was designed to not just produce the product but to promote the process as well. "It's amazing how many people don't know that potato chips are made from potatoes, or that potatoes are grown in the ground," says Cohen.

The viewing area of the Mount Jackson facility offers samples of all current chip varieties. "We really like people to see the transparency of the operation." Cohen says school trips are also welcome by appointment. "We've had girl scout troops, a group from a high school culinary arts class, and several local regulars who return to visit again and again.

"People are extremely loyal to their chip company," says Cohen. She adds, "We have a very loyal local following, and in some

cases, a national following. From mom and pop shops to specialty retailers to large grocers, our chips market themselves." Route 11 chips are available in over 1,000 Cracker Barrel restaurants nationwide—so they're in almost every state.

Potato Heads

For the past eight years Cohen and Connelly have been working to elevate the status of the potato chip. As the company's president, Cohen takes responsibility for sales and marketing operations and Connelly, vice president, oversees manufacturing and production. But the collaboration between the two is evident.

Snack food is a fun business, but it's also dynamic. "It's the funnest thing I've done," says Connelly. Goals for the future include to stay on track and continue to make as good a chip as you can find—anywhere.

No additional pun intended (or was it?), Connelly says, "When you crunch the numbers, the margin is hair thin, but we have jobs, and we're providing other jobs."

Cohen adds, "People are spending their valuable time here to make a good product. We are serious about making a good product—but we haven't even scratched the surface." And that's no small potatoes. *a*

Chip Factory / Retail Store

Route 11 Potato Chips
11 Edwards Way
Mount Jackson
www.rt11.com
1-800-294-SPUD
540-477-9664

Open to the public Monday
through Saturday, 9am–5pm

Fry-Viewing

The cooking schedule can vary throughout the week. If you want to be sure to see the chips cooking, Cohen encourages you to call in advance to make sure they're cooking that day. There is no charge for fry-viewing, but sampling is encouraged!

Directions

From Charlottesville take I-64 west to I-81 North (exit 87 toward Staunton/Winchester). Take I-81 to exit 269 (Shenandoah Caverns). Take a right off the ramp. Take your first right onto Caverns Road and then your next right onto Mount Jackson Industrial Park Road. Take a left into Edwards Way.