

A Conversation with the Huacani Family

On November 5, 2019, I had the privilege of interviewing standholders Nico and Joanna Neff Huacani, and their son Matthew Huacani, owners of the **Country Twist** at the Strafford Farmers Market. Below are excerpts from that interview about their background, their service to their customers, and the uniqueness of the market experience. — *Roger D. Thorne*



Joanna Neff Huacani, with her husband Nico Huacani, founded the iconic Country Twist stand at the Strafford Market in 1991. Country Twist specializes in hand-rolled soft pretzels in a variety of flavors, rolled and baked while you watch. Their son Matthew now serves as the manager of this popular business. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*

Crew members preparing “Party Dogs” at Country Twist in the Strafford Farmers Market include (L to R) Cheryl, Kelvin, Shrikar and Matthew Huacani, Stand Manager. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*



EARLY MEMORIES OF MARKET:

Roger: Joanna, tell me about your early exposure to “farmer marketing?”

Joanna: My grandfather was S. Clyde Weaver. At a very young age I learned the trade. I went to Market beginning at eleven years old. I started at Weaver’s in Lancaster, but there were Fridays that I would come down with Dad to the old downtown Wayne Market. By the time I was thirteen or fourteen, I was coming to the Wayne Market on a regular basis. I worked all through high school and college for Weaver’s, and then I went to Bolivia for several years. When Nic and I came back to Pennsylvania, I started to fill-in again where I could at Weaver’s. We had young ones by that time, so Nic would watch the girls while I came down to Market for a couple of days a week. Later Nic also worked at Weaver’s. Then, in the 1990s, the Market made some improvements, putting in tables and chairs in the front, and adding the stand on the side of the entrance. It was then that we decided to start our own business and make soft pretzels.

Nico: Before we started the new business, Joanna worked at the sampler table for Weaver’s. In the old market, we did not carry imported cheeses with as much variety as we see today, but here they began introducing new imported cheeses. Samplers would introduce them, and Joanna was in charge of that.

Joanna: My brother Sam (Neff) introduced some new imported cheese lines to the basic cheddar, Swiss and white American that was originally sold at Weaver’s. When we moved to the Market in Strafford, where we had much more space, we set-up a table in the front of the market and most every Saturday we had cheese samplings. I’d bring my children with me, including Matthew as a baby in the stroller, and he’d take his nap out behind Weaver’s while I wrapped cheese or waited on customers. All four of our children did that as they grew up. They got to know the Market quite well, and they all worked in the Market as they grew.



The S. Clyde Weaver stand at the Farmers Market in downtown Wayne, here being served in the early 1960s by (L to R) Joanna Neff, Ellen Royer, Janet Mast, and Elva Leaman. Courtesy of Dan Neff.

THE MOVE TO STRAFFORD FROM WAYNE:

Roger: Nic, I’m told you were the first ‘Market Master’ at Strafford when they moved in 1977?

Nico: My father-in-law purchased this building from Penn Fruit in 1976. There was much work to convert it from a supermarket to a Market. I was working for my father-in-law, cleaning the empty building, helping change the structure on the outside and at the entrances. Because the parking lot had been disused for so long, we had to clean-up the weeds and patch the holes in the lot. It took us many months to complete the outside and inside.

Matthew: This Strafford building was empty, and the main Market continued operating in the center of Wayne. They had bought this building (in 1976) and had (several months) to prepare it for the standholders who would move here (in March of 1977). I was born in 1978. My parents were busy adapting to a new baby, and moving into this area. There was a lot of transition.

This Market was very innovative, doing things before other folks did. The imported cheese line was a new thing, perhaps a beginning of the “foodie” craze. And re-purposing this building for Market, and for small independent stands, was very innovative. I never thought of how useful a big building could be for a market. It was a novel idea, a concept ahead of the time, to reuse and repurpose a structure for this purpose.

Joanna: They had talked for years about getting more space. When this Penn Fruit building became available, I remember Daddy was excited. But the price was phenomenal, so they waited a while and finally reached an agreement. It took about a year until they saw eye-to-eye.

The matter of parking at the downtown Wayne market was another big issue ... unreal. We often said we were amazed that our customers stayed with us and put up with the parking because it was such a hassle! Customers often had to park at the train station and walk the several blocks to the old Market. It was hard for them.

ORIGINS OF COUNTRY TWIST AND ITS PRODUCTS:

Roger: “Country Twist” is certainly one of the best-known stands at the Market. Your location is excellent—a first impression for any visitor. How did you conceive the idea of “Country Twist?”

Joanna: My brothers Sam and Dan Neff were ready to make some changes in the Market, and actually came to me with the idea. They wanted to put in a seating area to make the Market more customer friendly—to allow meeting a friend for coffee or enjoying a time-out in the Market. At the same time, there was a vacant space just inside the front door and they wanted to fill it.

This was the early ‘90s, and soft pretzels were a hot item. They thought that this would be an interesting product to add to our Market line, as we didn’t have anything quite like it. They came to me with the idea. I was somewhat shocked, but I was up to the challenge. I did much research and tested many recipes that summer. I would bring samples to the standholders to see what they thought. I worked at it all summer long till we got the recipes that we liked. We had to wait for our ovens to be made in New York, but when they arrived, we fired them up and we were selling soft pretzels when Country Twist opened in October of ‘91.

We soon found that the problem with selling just soft pretzels was that we had a lot of free time in the morning. Pretzels tend to be more of a midday to afternoon snack. Then one day Nic came over with a hotdog from Weaver’s and, hungry for lunch, he asked “Can you put some pretzel dough around it and heat it in the oven?” So we did as he asked ... and then we acknowledged that this is a new commercial possibility.

We started selling “pretzel dogs,” and they caught on. A “pretzel dog” is a full-size hotdog that has Parmesan cheese and herbs on top—and all using soft pretzel dough. It’s what makes it unique—giving it the flavor and the character that everybody loves because we are not using a rich pastry dough, just a good soft pretzel dough that goes well with everything.

Then, around 1995, a lady working in an adjacent stand bought some little cocktail dogs at Weaver’s, brought me a handful, and said ‘Could you put some dough around these for me?’ Though she was a friend, I now admit we did it



Preparing for the Grand Opening of the new Country Twist stand at the Strafford market in 1991, Marty admires Linda’s skill as she stretches a rope of pretzel dough before shaping. *Courtesy of Joanna Neff Huacani.*



Early on a Saturday morning, Alyssa and Caroline prepare the ever-popular “Party Dogs” at the Country Twist at the Strafford Market, while Martha places the next batch in the oven. *Courtesy of Roger D. Thorne.*

begrudgingly. But surprisingly, the idea caught on. One Christmastime, I was rolling dough, and I thought it would be a treat, for a gathering with the Neff family for the holidays, to bring some party dogs. A customer happened to walk by as I was preparing them, and her eyes got big and she got excited. “Oh, I’d like to buy some of those.” I said, “Well, we don’t make them to sell at this point.” As she left, our sales gal, who was a real go-getter, said, “Joanna, you are missing it. You’ve got to make these dogs. You make them, and I’ll sell them.” And that’s what we did. We started out on a small scale, placing a couple dozen at a time in a little basket out front. By 1995, we were actively selling party dogs.

Once we got our act together and figured out that this could be done, we were amazed. Once people started serving party dogs at their get-togethers, the big question was “where did you get these?” So, that’s how it began, and we’re sometimes struggling to keep up over the holidays.

Nic: It’s not only for a party time. It is a really good snack for the children when they come home after school.

Matthew: It’s now a primary food group for some of them. (laughing)



This image, taken in 1999, shows Rhoda Leaman waiting on two customers at the Country Twist stand at the Strafford Market. Of particular interest are the large, five-pound gold UTZ potato chip cans stacked against the wall. The legendary Edna Utz had by that time sold her stand to the Huacani’s, and Country Twist still acted as a Utz distributor. It was still common for aficionados of Utz potato chips to return to this stand week by week with their empty Utz cans, and have them refilled with what they considered the best chips that money could buy. *Photo courtesy of Carl Leaman.*

THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH UTZ POTATO CHIPS:

Roger: Tell me about the legendary Edna Utz, her booth here at the Market, and how that intersected with Country Twist.

Nico: In the mid-to-late 1990s, early every market morning, Edna would drive in from Hanover, Pa. (in York County—over 100 miles each way), her station wagon loaded up with one-pound cans and five-pound cans of Utz potato chips, and open her one-woman stand next to where Nancy’s Candy Corner is now. I was the market manager, and I would often help her unload. She was a long-time standholder from the old downtown Market, her husband Edgar had passed away, and she was getting on in age. She finally decided it was too hard for her to continue. Since she had a good relationship with me, she finally said, ‘Nico, I’ll sell you my stand. I can’t come in anymore.’

Joanna: Her age was the world's best-kept secret, but she was probably in her early nineties. And here she was in her nineties, three times a week, driving her old classic station wagon, and doing a two-hour drive each way to and from Market. The Market was open from 6:00 AM to 4:00 PM during those times, and you can just imagine what her day was like—and her without a crew or employees. So Nic always jumped in to help her and did whatever she needed, and they developed a good relationship.

Nico: What is so special is that, just selling pretzels and chips, she developed a relationship with the people in here. She knew the families, she knew the children, the grandchildren. They came in here and that was special for her, and that's why she was drawn all this time coming to the Market.

Joanna: This place was her life. It was her family.

Roger: When Carol and I first started coming to Market here over 25 years ago, we'd watch people arrive early Saturday mornings with these big empty potato chip cans. Then, like a fellow going to a gas station to get his tank filled, these people would get their cans filled with chips that would last them until next week. Walking by carrying their filled cans, they'd have such contented looks on their faces. We had never seen such a thing.

Matthew: That was the uniqueness of it, that you could get a fresher product, a more unique product, than what you could get in the grocery store or supermarket. The customers had a relationship with the individual selling it to them. There was an aspect of trust and connection. That embodied Edna, the matron mother of the Market. She was never sick, she was always there, and it was always her at her stand.

And it was the strong relationship that Edna had with my father over those years that made her feel confident that all her work with all her customers would be well cared for in his hands ... and our hands. And we continued as we could with that tradition of serving our customers with chips and pretzels and snack foods. Unfortunately, that market niche would ultimately change.

Roger: After Edna sold her stand to "Country Twist," did she ever come in again to work behind the counter, or was that the end?

Nico: I think she came to see us one last time, but that was the end. Finally the Utz company no longer made available its one and five-pound cans of potato chips. Now it's all packaged, available in any supermarket anywhere.

Joanna: And that led to the demise of selling Utz potato chips in the Market.

LOOKING AHEAD:

Roger: Let's conclude this interview. So, what makes this place unique ... one of a kind?

Nico: Mothers come in here with their children, to teach them how to relate to others and how to buy things. When a child comes up to our counter, we look directly at the child, talk directly to them. It's an education for these families, and for us too.

Matthew: Our goal is to seek to have a place where I would want to go, where I would want to take my family. To my employees, my hope is that they will enjoy the work they are doing and the people that they meet here. We have a diverse community here, and one thing that I've learned growing up in Market is that everybody is different. Our goal is to serve them the best we can. That's why I enjoy serving people food, whether it's a soft pretzel, a hotdog, a drink. This is my service to them—because it makes people happy. That's what my goal is—to serve customers and develop relationships. That might sound a bit cliché, but that's the heart of the Market experience. I can go buy food anywhere, but it's the relationships and the uniqueness of community here—to create a hometown center, a place of comfort.

Roger: Thank you.



From *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, October 3, 1983, this photograph appeared in an article about the Strafford Farmers Market entitled "At age 50, market retains family theme." The photo's caption reads: "Edna Utz, at her counter in the market, is ready to sell her Utz potato chips."

"Mmmmmmm ... buying Utz potato chips, scooped out fresh from the display case and placed in a metal can with a lid (or a fresh papersack if you forgot to bring your tin can). Best chips in the whole world."
— Ken Chestek