

N. Brooklyn's pickle men

McClure's Pickles celebrates International Pickle Day

By Aaron Short

As International Pickle Day comes to a close on a Sunday afternoon in mid-September, a vapory, salty fog of sweat and brine hovers over the intersection of Orchard and Broome Streets in the Lower East Side.

Brooklynites Bob McClure and his older brother Joe are breaking down their display their station, throwing away uneaten samples, and accounting for any remaining unsold jars. There aren't many.

"We sold out of every jar," Joe says.

"It was crazy. It was busy as hell," Bob adds.

Bob and Joe McClure are pickle men. Their joint venture, McClure's Pickles, which they launched in late 2006 in Brooklyn and Detroit, has brought them to local retail establishments, food conventions, and outdoor festivals, like the 2nd Annual International Pickle Day. Their pickles are available at a number of stores in North Brooklyn.

"Everybody loved the pickles," Joe added. "All the streets were blocked off and there were pickles everywhere. Some people had no idea what was going on."

The McClure brothers got interested in pickling when they were children growing up in Michigan. Their family would shop at the wholesale farmers markets outside Detroit at 3 or 4 a.m. to buy cucumbers, peppers, and other ingredients when they were making pickles during the week.

"I remember working in our kitchen dipping our hands in the ice water and crying all day. Our parents told us don't touch our eyes or our face and don't use the bathroom without washing out hands," Bob said.

Working off their grandfather's original pickling recipes, the McClure brothers started canning small batches of pickles a year and a half ago. The ingredients come from all over. They get their peppers from the Blue Family Farm in New Jersey, their cucumbers from Mr. Pickle in Brooklyn, their garlic from Gilroy, Calif., and additional cucumbers and dill from the McCarren Park Farmers Market when local vegeta-



McClure's Pickles finds a young fan.



Photos by Rebecca Winters

The McClure brothers busy at work on International Pickle Day.

bles are in season.

The process usually starts at 2 or 3 a.m. when Joe gets up, preps the ingredients, cleans and spears the vegetables, and throws them in ice water. Then he makes the brine, which is a combination of water, vinegar, salt, and other ingredients, and heats it up to a boil. Finally, by around 9 a.m., he pours the brine into one-quart jars, inserts the vegetables, and seals and packs the jars, ready to be distributed.

"We put in a full day, about 12 to 13 hours," Joe explains. Joe is also a full-time student, studying for a PhD in Physiology in Detroit. "I nap in between. We'll do a run every other day and then we'll do inventory and labeling."

"Our toughest thing is keeping a steady inventory available for our customers," says Bob.

Bob, who lives in Williamsburg and works full-time as an actor and writer, makes smaller batches in Brooklyn-area kitchens once every couple of months. Most of the work is done in Detroit.

After incorporating and launching a website, Bob and Joe met with local retailers in Brooklyn and Detroit to introduce their products. Bob does most of the retail outreach in New York, often going to specialty food stores and offering samples to the owners.

"The retailers have been great here. They like to support local businesses and foster community. We're not just going to go to any retail outlet and put our pickles there. We like to know their values and what they believe in. Also, the right people approach you."

"Pickling is the new black," Taylor Erkinen, co-owner of Brooklyn Kitchen, agrees. People are considering more carefully where their food comes from and people are appreciating the need to store food for winter. It's also a craft thing."

Emily Dinan, a Brooklyn Kitchen employee and McClure Pickles fan elaborates. "Cooking is a nation fad. Plus this is part of an increasing environmental awareness on the part of the

community. Caning is a democratic move through food."

In addition to supplying several North Brooklyn specialty food shops and grocery stores, a few bars have requested the pickle jars. The Bushwick Country Club has even created several cocktails using McClure's brine, including a bloody mary and a pickletini.

"The Bloody Mary's are really good, man," Joe argues.

The next product the McClure brothers are working on is a relish, and adding other vegetables such as carrots and green beans to their pickling line. They are working on expanding their products into Manhattan shops, and places like Saxelby Cheesemongers in the Essex Street Market (120 Essex Street) and Russ & Daughters (179 Houston Street) appear to be good matches. Any chance we will see them at Shea Stadium?

"Isn't Danny Meyer up for that contract?" Bob asks.

"Then it'll be either us or Rick's Picks," Joe answers.

McClure's pickles are available in a number of North Brooklyn stores retailing for \$12 per quart, including Brooklyn Kitchen (616 Lorimer Street), Bedford Cheese Shop (220 Bedford Avenue), Marlowe and Sons (81 Broadway), The Lodge (318 Grand Street), the Spuyten Duyvil Grocery (218 Bedford Avenue), and in cocktail form at The Bushwick Country Club (618 Grand Street).