

Sept. 27, 2000--

COLUMBUS, Ohio--- Punt, pass and kick.

That's how my tummy felt after eating the spicy White Castle dip that took first place in the ninth annual White Castle Recipe Contest held recently at White Castle headquarters here.

This stuff will put the rush back in your football parties.

The unusual dip was designed by Debbie Gardner of Loveland, Ohio. It gets its feistiness from a 9-ounce chunk of Hoffman's hot pepper cheese, 3 White Castle Dusseldorf mustard packets and 10 White Castles. It's as lovingly bizarre as last year's champion, spicy cheeseburger soup.

Spice is the last thing a slider needs.

This was the third year in a row I was a contest judge. I leaned on the expertise of Joyce Cosenza, a southwest suburban Mokena resident who was the 2000 White Castle employee cookoff winner for her White Castle manicotti special. (She won \$100.)

Cosenza was a celebrity judge for the contest along with WBNS-TV news anchor Lisa Kick (a great name for this gig), Bill Ingram III, CEO, president and chairman of the board of White Castle System, and others.

Cosenza, 58, works at a Mokena accounting firm during the day and at a Mokena White Castle at night. She took the White Castle job in 1998 to make extra money when her 8-month-old granddaughter was diagnosed with cystic fibrosis. She originally took the job for six months. She enjoyed working at the White Castle so much she has stayed on her 5-to-9 p.m. Monday through Friday shift and 10 a.m.-to-7 p.m. Saturday shift.

Cosenza celebrated part of her 37th wedding anniversary as a contest judge in Columbus. Her husband, Bob, manages a grocery store in Woodruff, Wis., about 30 miles north of Rhinelander.

More than 400 people entered this year's contest, competing for the grand prize of 52 sacks of 10 sliders a week (with an average retail value of \$182). A White Castle spokesperson said entries trickled in from as far away as Montana, Arizona and Korea.

Cosenza and I agreed that the dip was the best of the 10 finalists.

"It's very creative," Cosenza said. "I don't know how people think these things up. They're very clever."

But what's the proper social setting for spicy White Castle dip?

"Football parties," Cosenza answered. "A get-together with kids. It's excellent. I liked the way she used the onions."

The runner-up was herb roasted chicken with White Castle stuffing, created by Andrew Tweedle of Warren, Mich. This dish cleared my sinuses. It was heavy on thyme and sage, which detracted from the 10 diced White Castles (with pickles) that boogied with the 5-pound roasting chicken.

The White Castle What a Surprise onion soup finished third. The recipe was submitted by Terry Ann Moore of Oaklyn, N.J. Slider soup is made from 10 White Castles, 4 cups of thinly sliced onions and 3 tablespoons of butter.

Also add one clove garlic, minced; 3 tablespoons of snipped fresh parsley; 6 cups of quality beef broth; 1/4 cup of grated Parmesan, and 5 slices each of Swiss and provolone cheese.

The soupmeister then sautes onions in butter in a soup kettle until caramelized. Stir in garlic, parsley and broth, Parmesan, salt and pepper. Heat to boiling, stirring occasionally. Place each White Castle in an ovenproof soup bowl and ladle in the soup. Cover the top of bowl with a slice of Swiss and provolone. Run the bowls under the broiler to melt and lightly brown the cheese. Presto. You have 10 bowls of some pretty slinky soup. "I like the saltiness of this," Cosenza said while sipping the soup.

A White Castle pot pie also got high marks.

Serena Booker of Roxana, Ill., blended 10 White Castles with a 10-ounce package of frozen peas and carrots, one-third cup each of margarine, all-purpose flour, and chopped onion and 1 3/4 cups of beef broth to achieve that classic White Castle crave.

Cosenza and I disagreed on the pot pie.

I liked the fact that the hamburger stood out. What's the point of making a White Castle recipe if you can't taste the White Castle? Unlike typical hamburgers, White Castles are cooked on a cushion of steam, without cooking oil or grease. Mmmm!

"If I was at a dinner party and they served me the pot pie, I'd enjoy it," Cosenza said. "But I would not ask for the recipe. I love carrots and peas and all that stuff." Cosenza looked down at the slender chunks of carrots in her sampling of pot pie.

She continued, "Now if these (the carrots) were cut up into little pieces like these (the peas), and add another vegetable, it would be perfect. You're not getting the carrot flavor as much as the peas."

I love talking White Castle shop. I also love watching Ingram at these contests. As president and CEO of White Castle, he personally eats at each of the chain's 345 restaurants annually. That's a whole lotta shakin' goin on.

White Castle does not franchise its restaurants. All U.S. units are owned and operated by the family-held company. Gross restaurant sales in 1999 exceeded \$438 million.

Ingram is meticulous in the way he samples the entries, and he's always a couple of steps ahead of the rest of the judges. He looks like he's seen it all before.

"Chicago's our largest market," Ingram said after the contest (his favorite also was the dip). "We'll probably open 25 new restaurants this year, four or five in the Chicago area. We're a long way from saturating the Chicago market. For years the White Castle in Merrillville was the leading Castle in the Chicago area. White Castles are an acquired taste. People either like them or they don't like them.

"There's no ambivalence about them."

Here's the winning recipes:

Spicy White Castle dip

MAKES 20-30 SERVINGS

1 (8-ounce) package of cream cheese

3 packets of White Castle Dusseldorf mustard

1/2 cup finely chopped onion

10 White Castle hamburgers

1 (9-ounce) chunk Hoffman's hot pepper cheese (see Note)

2/3 cup milk

2 tablespoons parsley flakes

1. Mix cream cheese and mustard together and spread at the bottom of a 9-by-13-inch serving dish. Evenly spread onion on top of the mixture.

2. In a food processor, chop up the White Castles and spread evenly over onion.
3. Cut cheese into chunks, add milk and melt this in microwave for 1 to 2 minutes. Stir until creamy. Pour cheese mixture over White Castles. Sprinkle parsley flakes on top.
4. Heat for 3 to 4 minutes on high in microwave or 20 minutes in a preheated 350-degree oven. Serve with tortilla chips.

Note: If you cannot find Hoffman's, substitute another hot pepper cheese.

1st place winner, Debbie Gardner

Nutrition Information (per serving) Calories: 151 From fat: 78 Percentages of daily value based on 2,000-calorie diet.

Total fat 9g 13% Saturated fat 5g 25% Cholesterol 31mg 10% Sodium 284mg 12%

Carbohydrate 11g 4% Dietary fiber 0g 0% Sugars 2g

Protein 7g

Vitamin A 7% Vitamin C 2% Calcium 11% Iron 6%

White Castle manicotti special

MAKES 6 SERVINGS

1 (10-ounce) package frozen chopped spinach

10 White Castle hamburgers

6 uncooked manicotti shells

1 1/4 cup imported Romano cheese, divided

2 eggs

1 (28-ounce) jar meatless spaghetti sauce

1. Chop slightly thawed spinach into a food processor. Rinse, then squeeze all the water from spinach.
2. Separate hamburgers from buns. If hamburgers are frozen, crumble and brown. If fresh, cut into very small pieces. Set buns aside.

3. Cook 6 manicotti shells according to package directions. Cool and set aside.
4. Toast 5 sets of the hamburger buns, then chop finely in food processor to make bread crumbs.
5. Mix together hamburger meat, 1 cup cheese, spinach, bread crumbs, eggs. Fill the manicotti shells with the mixture and place in a greased 8-by-6-inch baking dish. Pour the spaghetti sauce over the manicotti. Bake in a preheated 350-degree oven, uncovered, for 35 to 45 minutes until golden and bubbly.

Before serving, sprinkle top with remaining Romano cheese.

From Joyce Cosenza, White Castle employee contest winner

Nutrition Information (per serving) Calories: 832 From fat: 271 Percentages of daily value based on 2,000-calorie diet.

Total fat 30g 46% Saturated fat 16g 79% Cholesterol 177mg 59% Sodium 2096mg 87%

Carbohydrate 100g 33% Dietary fiber 3g 10% Sugars 9g

Protein 38g

Vitamin A 65% Vitamin C 53% Calcium 57% Iron 44%