

**IT'S THE CRACKER JACKS: CRACKER JACK CHICKEN AND WAFFLES WENT FROM HOMESTAND SPECIAL TO MAIN MENU ITEM**



**BEST** New Menu Item

## It's the Cracker Jacks

Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles went from homestand special to main menu item

by LINDA DECKARD



**C**hicken and waffles has been around awhile, mostly at mom and pop restaurants, but the ballpark version — Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles — is a new idea.

Afonso Jefferson, Spectra Food Services & Hospitality general manager at Pensacola (Fla.) Blue Wahoo Stadium, formerly Bayfront Stadium, said the item was introduced for the homestand against the Mississippi Braves, in

honor of the Atlanta Braves. It is a blend of sweet and savory, with chicken tenderloins crusted in Cracker Jacks and fried, then served over vanilla butter brushed waffles and topped with maple honey mustard syrup. The Portside Grille stand serves this decadent dish for \$10 and it is worth every penny, he said.

*Venues Today* judges agreed, voting Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles the best new menu item of the year, winning one of three Silver Spoon awards.

"The industry has a lot of items now that are much different than the norm," noted Ken Young, Spectra Food and Hospitality president. "Over the last few years, the chicken and waffle combination has gained a lot in popularity, especially in the South." Young first saw it in Los Angeles.

Combining the dish with something as ubiquitous to baseball as Cracker Jacks went over extremely well.

"We try to differentiate ourselves with this type of thing," Young said. He assumed it would be adopted at other Spectra client ballparks and trade show venues, especially in the South, after it is first evaluated based on equipment needed and the ability to hold up under a warmer if necessary. While Spectra cooks fresh, there are always exceptions. As to waffle irons, "they're not that big. They can fit someplace."

Jefferson said Spectra introduces a new special at every single homestand at Blue Wahoo Stadium. With 15 homestands, that's 15 new items. The choice is usually based on the team coming in, a special guest in the building or a holiday.

The special is then promoted in emails,

newsletters and on chalkboards at the ballpark.

As soon as he tasted it, Jefferson knew Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles was a winner. Over the course of the homestand in August, Spectra sold 248 servings of the item. That compares to a usual homestand special sell-through of "as low as 5-10 a day to 35 a day if we max out. This one was 50 or more a day on average," Jefferson said.

At the end of the season, Spectra will pick one or two items that were a big hit and add them to the regular menu. For instance the Bubba-Dub, a double deck, grilled cheese with bacon and tomato added to it, was one such item. It was named after one of the team's new owners, Bubba Watson, who doesn't like a lot of meat. The Billy Hamilton sandwich — blackened ham and cheese and the Bleu Angel — blue cheese and buffalo chicken named after the famed and locally-based flying team, preceded the Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles special to the menu.

The \$10 price is based on the team's interest in keeping food costs at 25-26 percent. Cracker Jack Chicken & Waffles is right in that ballpark, Jefferson said. Chef Travis Wilson created it.

Top line revenue from food and drink at Blue Wahoo Stadium is \$2 million. The team draws 300,000 fans annually.

Prior to joining Spectra, first at the Charlotte (N.C.) Knights stadium, Jefferson was with Delaware North for seven years, and then Aramark with the Chicago Bears. He joined Spectra in March 2014.

Interviewed for this story: **Afonso Jefferson**, (850) 934-8444, X 118; **Ken Young**, (757) 622-2222, X104