

[IDEAS 2 GO]

Something for Everyone

Chicken salad, bread pudding and a dog wash differentiate one Louisiana retailer.

BY AL HEBERT

It's a simple law of business: Listen to your customers.

The Cormie family, owners of Cormie's Grocery in Lake Charles, Louisiana, unanimously agree that adhering to this principle has helped make their business a success. In fact, Cormie's Grocery goes beyond success; it's a genuine landmark among residents in Southwest Louisiana.

Eighty years ago, when customers urged Mural Cormie Sr. to sell a few potato chips and cold drinks at his gas station, he listened. And he continued to listen when they asked for hot foods. He even surprised his customers with something they didn't even know they wanted: a dog wash. "That's the key," said Mural Cormie Jr. "We gave our customers what they wanted, and as we visited other locations around the country, we brought back more ideas. So they got what they wanted, plus more."

Over time, the Cormie family has transformed a small gas station into a busy corner store offering great home cooking, staple grocery items — and prime beef — as well as hunting supplies and fishing tackle. "My father wanted to cater to the working public and the everyday sale to the sportsman. We weren't after the big box stores," said Cormie Jr.

SPORTSMAN'S CORNER

Louisiana's motto, "Sportsman's Paradise," aptly describes Cormie's. From shotgun shells to shiners, Cormie's is



Doug Burguieres has been a loyal Cormie's customer for almost two decades.

the perfect stop for customers heading out for duck hunting or fishing.

A little over 40 years ago, Mural's father moved the business from its original location to Lake Charles, down the road from Big Lake, which feeds into Calcasieu Lake and numerous waterways throughout Southwest Louisiana. It's also about 30 miles from the Gulf of Mexico.

Staff at Cormie's help raise tiny baitfish that need a controlled environment, which can be a painstaking process. "We really don't make money from it, but our customers want them and it brings them into the store and they buy other items," said Cormie Jr.

CHICKEN SALAD & BREAD PUDDING

To-die-for chicken salad brings Cormie's lunchtime offer to another level. Cormie Jr. won't divulge many details, but this unique product seems the result of careful handling and a secret recipe. "After it's cooked, the chicken is deboned by hand, then hand checked again. Everything is mixed carefully and handled in a delicate way. We end up with a special texture and unique blend of flavors," he said.

Cormie's makes hundreds of pounds of chicken salad every day and then sells it in sandwiches, in pint and quart containers and it caters to business meetings, wedding receptions and family reunions.

Also quite popular at Cormie's: bread pudding. If a poll was conducted across Louisiana, the Southwest residents might skew the results because of their access and devotion to Cormie's bread pudding. Again, Cormie's won't share details about the recipe or its preparation, although a bit of rum extract gives it some flair.

GOING TO THE DOGS

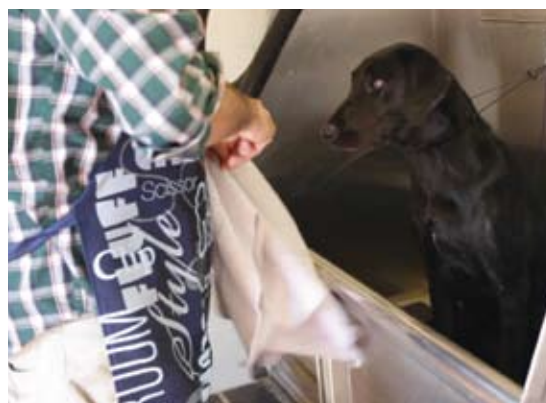
One idea Cormie Jr. captured during a visit to Dallas — a dog wash — has become a popular and logical addition to Cormie's offerings. I thought it "could be really convenient for people, especially after they bring their dogs hunting or camping. They could drive up and wash them in our specially designed facility," he said.

Cormie's has the only dog wash in the Lake Charles area. It's self-serve and features a walk-up ramp, a roomy basin for washing, a shampoo and conditioner dispenser and a commercial-grade sprayer.

And after a day of hunting, fishing or camping, a customer's truck, boat or four-wheeler can also be washed in the multi-stall car and boat wash while his dog gets cleaned up, too. In fact, many people make a visit to the dog wash a regular occurrence, even if they aren't hunters or fishers, just because of the convenience.

FAMILY ATTENTION

Gas stations and convenience stores thrive on, well, convenience. It's something Cormie Jr. reminds himself of ev-



After it's cooked, the chicken for Cormie's chicken salad is deboned by hand (above); the dog wash is a popular addition to Cormie's (left).

ery day. But he's since passed on the store to its fourth generation owner — his son, Chris Cormie — who now carries on the tradition of bringing convenience to dedicated customers.

One loyal customer, Doug Burguières, assistant planner at the City of Lake Charles' Planning and Zoning Office, orders Cormie's steak dinner for administrative professionals' week every year. "They make steak, rice and gravy, fresh

green beans, mashed potatoes and their famous bread pudding. It's made fresh, hot and ready when I pick it up."

"They've doubled in size since I started shopping here

almost 20 years ago," continued Burguières, "but they still have the service and attention that you would expect in a family-owned business." **NACS**

The Gas Station Gourmet explores America's hidden culinary treasure — gas station cuisine. TV host Al Hebert shares these stories and on occasion, a recipe or two. See more at GasStationGourmet.com.