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Hot dog, it's the Fourth!

Hot dogs are popular picnic fare for the Fourth of July, making Kunzler & Co. president Chris Kunzler a happy guy.

On this most American of holidays, the humble hot dog is suddenly elevated to celebrity status as true patriotic fare.

In fact, July was declared National Hot Dog Month in 1957 by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce because of baseball season and the Fourth of July holiday — both events associated with eating hot dogs.

And in Lancaster County, hot dogs are synonymous with the name Kunzler — which bills itself as the world's largest hot dog-manufacturing operation.

Just why is the hot dog so popular?

"It's an easy meal that satisfies teenagers to adults," said Chris Kunzler III, president of Kunzler & Co. Inc.

The hot dog also is affordable, likable and versatile, Kunzler said.

Since 1901, Kunzler's family has been selling sausage and hot dogs in Lancaster.

Kunzler & Co. still sells hot dogs from a downtown cart in Penn Square. It also distributes its product across the country and around the world, as far away as China, Mexico and the Caribbean.

The 652 Manor St. manufacturing plant now produces about 3 million pounds of hot dogs and sausages every week.

And although the hot dog recipe is still the same, today's dogs aren't exactly the same product that Kunzler's great-grandfather made.

"We're giving our customers more and more choices within that category," Kunzler said.

"There are the all-beef hot dogs, jalapeno and cheddar, chicken or turkey hot dogs," Kunzler said, "and then there are the sausages. ... We are constantly expanding, testing spices and tastes."

Kunzler knows that children are his key audience.

"Not only are they the consumers of today, but tomorrow as well," Kunzler said.

Kunzler and his wife, Kim, have six children between them from prior marriages. "My kids are all growing and changing with the wind," Kunzler said, "and so are their tastes."

"I am a flavor loyalist," Kunzler said. "Give me the all-beef hot dog. Save the glitter and glamour."

But there are others, including his own son, Kyle, who "just love that ethnic and spicy flair," Kunzler said.

Kunzler, 49, a native of Lancaster County, has worked at the Manor Street facility for most of his life.

"In 1977, when I was a junior at Lampeter-Strasburg High School, my Dad said, 'It's time to go to work,'" Kunzler said.



Chris Kunzler poses with a 1924 Ford Model T delivery truck displayed in front of the Kunzler plant on Manor Street in Lancaster.

His first assignment at the family business was "to learn the art of sausage-making," starting each day at 4 a.m.

While the early morning start was not his favorite part of the job, Kunzler said it was "the greatest education" he could have had.

"Looking back, now that I'm president of the company, I worked beside people in the 1970s and '80s who are still working here, too," he said.

"We're committed to the city," Kunzler said, in part because employees can walk to the neighborhood factory and get to work "regardless of the weather."

Memorial Day, the unofficial start of the summer grilling season, is actually the biggest individual sales day for hot dogs.

"The weather plays a great role in sales," Kunzler said.

This Fourth of July weekend, which is supposed to be sunny and warm, should be just right for grilling those hot dogs.

"I'm sure I'll be eating a hot dog this weekend," Kunzler said. "I eat an awful lot of hot dogs."