



Kambria Harris mixes a bin of freshly made strawberry-flavored popcorn as it cools at The Mad Popper in Homestead Market on Wednesday. The store near Southpoint specializes in gourmet versions of the popular treat.

# Something special

## Specialty popcorn boutique Mad Popper staying alive in a slowed-down economy

BY MONICA CHEN

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**DURHAM** — After a year in business, Kami Harris and Stephany Heckman know all about popcorn.

There's the mushroom popcorn, which is bigger and harder to chew, and are used for glazed, candy-coated flavors.

There's the butterfly popcorn, which is smaller and soft enough that it just about melts in your mouth.

And then there are all the different flavors they layer upon the popcorn. Cheddar, plain old butter and salt and even salsa. They keep things interesting with a new flavor every week while rotating the old favorites, including the more unusual Carolina barbecue flavor and the popular caramel.

"It's a secret recipe," Harris said with a smile.

The Mad Popper, located in Homestead Market along N.C.



Stephany Heckman (left) and Harris, owners of The Mad Popper, are celebrating the one-year anniversary of their store in Homestead Market.

54, opened last May with a niche in gourmet popcorn. The shop doesn't sell smoothies or coffee, or sandwiches or hot dogs. Just popcorn.

Amazingly, The Mad Popper

has survived the economic crisis of the past year, the worst recession seen by the nation in decades.

This past weekend, the shop celebrated its anniversary

with a party, bringing back a customer favorite — the fried dough flavor — and providing hot dogs and snow cones. Its Celebration Mix flavor: sweet strawberry glazed popcorn tossed in creamy white chocolate with a sprinkling of candy Nerds.

When asked how they managed to survive, Harris and Heckman both seemed surprised as well as grateful.

"We weren't open prior to that whole situation, so we couldn't really compare it to previous years," Heckman said. "For us, sales were steady. They remained steady throughout the year. I don't think we saw the growth we were hoping to see, but we're very happy with how it ended up."

"It's funny, with the economy, people will come in for a snack just to make themselves feel better," Harris said. "They don't cut back on things like

see **POPPERS** | page D4

### POPPER

FROM PAGE D1

this, and the same with coffee."

To keep cash coming in, the two did their fair share of fundraisers and reaching out to wholesalers on top of the storefront business. Heckman and Harris want to do more marketing in the upcoming year. The Mad Popper is currently participating in the Taste Carolina Food Tour.

The business needs to reach out to more schools for fundraising and to corporations for holiday corporate gifts, said Heckman.

"We'd like to get into wholesaling for a bit, reach out to local businesses who'd like to carry our products on their shelves. Grassroots marketing," she added.

"A lot of people still don't know that we're here," Harris said.

The economy did ham-

per the business' growth, the two admitted.

"I don't think we foresaw the economy doing what it did," Harris said.

Foot traffic was up during Christmas, and it's climbing up again now that the weather is warmer.

The business is somewhat treading water. According to Harris, they've yet to turn a profit. According to Heckman, they're turning a profit, but just barely.

"I think our product is unique enough," Heckman said. "I think if we had entered into a saturated market, it would've been more difficult. But the novelty of what we're selling has helped a lot."

The business has picked up a number of regular customers, including Kathy Fortner, a friend of Harris'.

Fortner, her two young sons and husband go to the shop weekly to check out the changing flavors.

They get two tin-fuls. (Mad Popper gives discounts to customers who bring back tins for refills.)

"We love to snack on popcorn," Fortner said. "They're very personable, friendly... You can walk in there and they'll work with you. You can mix and match your flavors."

Another appeal of the product is what Heckman called "the nostalgia factor."

"Some of the people that come in used to go to gourmet popcorn shops

when they were little," she said. "When I was little, I never experienced anything like this, except for Christmas. There was always gourmet popcorn shops around Christmas."

About six years ago, Heckman went to a gourmet popcorn shop in Chicago, where there seemed to be a comeback of the offering. Harris, meanwhile, worked part-time in a gourmet popcorn shop in Indianapolis when her daughter was born.

When Harris and her

family moved to Durham, she stayed at home with her two children and began to write a business plan. And as fate would have it, Harris and Heckman met when the latter was working part-time as a waitress at Rockfish Seafood Grill at The Streets at Southpoint after getting her MBA.

The two eventually got together to work on a business plan for The Mad Popper, and the shop was born.

"A lot of people were skeptical. They didn't

know how the two of us would handle things," Heckman admitted.

But the two have since found out that they have complementary skills. While Heckman tends to procrastinate, Harris is on top of things. And conversely, while Harris shies away from the accounting, Heckman likes to crunch numbers.

Eventually, the two hope to expand.

"We need to get this place totally on its feet and we would love to open another location," Heckman said.