

Crew creating Tahoe holiday tradition sworn to secrecy

By Kathryn Reed

Orders are already being placed – even from doctors who know this is not health food. It's quite the opposite.

But there seems to be something therapeutic about this once-a-year specialty item. While they can't actually be bought until November, a gang of aficionados gathered on a September Sunday morning in a back corner of Barton Memorial Hospital to start the process.



Bob Harms is at the walnut station during the September assembly of cheeseballs.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

It was like it was their religion – the reverence with which they spoke of these cheeseballs, the dedication they have year in and year out to assemble them.

Lake Tahoe News was not allowed in until the secret ingredient was well out of sight.

“The secret ingredient comes in bulk. We can get it in smaller amounts, but it’s cost prohibitive,” Pearl Parks explains.

All of this secrecy and early assembly is for the more than 1,000 cheeseballs the Barton Auxiliary sells each year. And each year they sell out.

Parks rallies the troops to make sure the cheeseballs are ready for the masses to buy at the holiday fair on Nov. 4 from 9am-3pm at St. Theresa’s. It all started in June with the ribbon being cut, bags bought and tags set to go.

When the fundraiser first started in 1988 all the mixing was done by hand. At that time the cheeseballs were not a big seller.

But through the years it has become a tradition. Some people place their order a year in advance. It’s not uncommon for people to order a dozen.

Parks is pretty sure these cheeseballs have shown up as hors d’oeuvres at the same party.

The base is cream cheese and butter. Then there is a secret ingredient. Parks says people have guessed it. A tiny taste on a cracker was not enough for this reporter to figure it out. (Time to make a cheeseball order.)

Big mixers in the kitchen at Barton churn for 3½ hours. Half were made this particular day, the other half will be made on a Sunday in October.

Each ball is measured before the nuts are put on. Each is 10 ounces.

Then the balls are rolled in walnuts. There was a time when the walnuts were cracked and hulled – not anymore. But they

are chopped up fine before the ball is rolled in them. Other nuts have been used, but it got to be too expensive.

Another station is responsible for putting them in the bags. All are tied with a gold ribbon and have a little tag with a blurb about the cheeseballs.

All are frozen – in a locked freezer. And they aren't at the hospital.

Parks said people have found the balls in their freezer years later and they still taste good. They can be refrozen. Some people have melted them over fettuccine or turned them into a dip.

For the first time in 12 years the price is going up – to \$8. This is an increase of 50 cents. To place an order, call (530) 573.1416 or (530) 577.0328. Besides the holiday fair, cheeseballs will also be available at Barton Hospital on Nov. 7 from 10am-1pm, Carson Valley Medical Center on Nov. 15 from 10am-2pm, and during the Festival of Trees and Lights at MontBleu Nov. 30-Dec. 2. The money raised goes to the Barton Auxiliary, which in turn uses the money on various Barton Health projects.

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