

CRAIG CULVER

Enjoying the sweet rewards of his work

BY LISA M. SCHMELZ

You would expect the man who brought Wisconsin (and, ultimately, 18 other states) the ButterBurger and Fresh Frozen Custard to be a little, well, larger than he is. But as devoted as Craig Culver is to his empire of 435 Culver's franchises, he is equally devoted to health.

"We take health very seriously at Culver's," he says, his own fit frame and under-200 cholesterol level a testament to those words. "We have a gym in our lower level with weights and machines. We all get health assessments. There's no smoking, and we promote healthy living."

Surprised? Don't be. Yes, Culver's offers some gastronomical wonders with calorie counts higher than your credit score, but Culver the man isn't on a mission to clog your arteries. If anything, Culver, who works out daily, is about balance. So go ahead and enjoy a Cherry Cheesecake Concrete Mixer, but then take a brisk walk. And if your post-custard stroll includes people you love — people you consider family — that will really make Culver smile.

Like a lot of young people, Culver didn't want to stick close to home after he graduated from UW-Oshkosh in 1973. His parents, George and Ruth, owned several supper clubs and Farm Kitchen Resort in Baraboo. While he grew up in his parent's restaurants, after college he opted to work for McDonald's. In that full-circle way life operates though, he soon found himself longing for home.

"My dream was the opportunity to move back to my hometown — to Sauk City and Prairie du Sac — and bring my family with me and live happily ever after," he says.

Culver's dream came true in 1984, when he, his wife, Lea, and his parents converted an A&W Root Beer into the first Culver's. Millions of ButterBurgers later, Culver still marvels at the company's success.

"Along the way, good things happened," he says. "We grew the little place."

Culver would love to see his daughters — Chelsea, 20, a student at Edgewood College; Mandy, 25, an art teacher in Ozaukee County; and Brittany, 29, a food stylist in Chicago, who works many of the Culver's photo shoots — take over at some point.

"I want it to remain a family-owned business. This is something we created, and it's got our name on it. It's our legacy."



CRAIG CULVER'S MUST-SEES

APOSTLE ISLANDS:

They're beautiful.

SPRING GREEN:

They have to go to Spring Green to visit Taliesin, the home of Frank Lloyd Wright.

GREEN LAKE:

We own a home in Green Lake, so, of course, we love going there.

WOLLERSHEIM WINERY:

They're the largest winery in Wisconsin.

DEVIL'S LAKE:

One of the best state parks in the Midwest.

THE ORIGINAL CULVER'S:

Of course, they have to see the first Culver's. It's in Sauk County.