

the Mustard Man

When Barry Levenson's mustard collection grew out of control, he did the only sensible thing: opened a museum. BY GINA HAMADEY

BARRY LEVENSON knows the exact moment he started collecting mustard: 2:30 a.m., October 28, 1986—after the Red Sox lost the World Series. Despondent, he pushed a cart down the aisles of a 24-hour market (“a good place for a walk”). He knew it wasn’t healthy for a grown man to be so depressed over a game. *I need a hobby*, he thought. Just then, he looked up to see jars of mustard. “They seemed to say to me, ‘If you collect us, they will come.’”

Barry quickly snapped up the 30 mustards sold nearby, then mail-ordered more. And more. The local paper ran a story about his collection once it reached 500 jars. A friend of his quipped, “What is this, the Wisconsin Mustard Museum?” For Barry, it was a lightbulb moment. “I didn’t want to look back at my life and wonder *what if?*” he said. So he quit his day job—as an assistant attorney general for the state—and rented a 1,400-square-foot space.

The National Mustard Museum now displays more than 5,300 jars and welcomes 35,000 visitors a year. If you’re one of them, you’ll be able to buy—and taste—450 varieties, watch a video on mustard’s 700-year history and tackle some trivia questions. [Does American yellow mustard get its color from a) saffron; b) food dye; c) turmeric; or d) crayons? If you guessed “c,” you are correct.]



If not for mustard, Barry wouldn’t have met his wife, Patti. She heard Barry on the radio, singing a fight song for “Poupon U,” the museum’s so-called university. Patti tracked him down and asked him to organize a tasting at her social club. “I guess you could say it was love at first squeeze,” he said.

Barry actually talks like this. He also signs his e-mails “Condimentally yours” and, in reference to a

lunchtime interview, quipped, “I’ll bring the mustard!” At the museum, if you’d like to watch a video, you’ll have to do it in the “Mustardpiece Theatre.”

What about the condiment inspires this level of devotion (and this many puns)? Barry’s quick to rattle off its attributes: It’s healthy, with a rich history and versatility. “Mustard is a blank

canvas,” he says. “You can paint works of art with a little creativity.” To that end, artisans add lemon, lavender and even root beer. Barry insists that each deserves a special place on his shelves.

He thinks back on the supermarket trip that started it all: “What struck me was that I’d never be lonely, because I would belong to a community of mustard lovers, and every year we’d all meet up at a collectors’ convention. It turns out nothing like that existed.” In opening his museum, he created something even better.



These jars are available at select supermarkets or mustardmuseum.com.

*Norman Bishop
Dill & Garlic
Mustard*
“Creamy and smooth, with lots of dill flavor and just a hint of garlic. It’s perfect with salmon.” (\$5.50)



*Slimm &
Nunne Sweet
& Nicely Hot
Mustard*
“The sweet taste ends with a nose tickle. I eat it with a spoon; it’s also great for pretzel dipping.” (\$5.75)



*Grey Poupon
Dijon Mustard*
“It may be everywhere, but it’s really good, especially in vinaigrettes.” (\$5.50)



*Boetje's Stone
Ground Mustard*
“This stone-ground, Dutch-style mustard has achieved a cult following; slather it on grilled sausages and ham sandwiches.” (\$3.50)



*K.L. Keller
Dijon with
Black Truffle*
“Truffles are pricey, but the earthy flavor will elevate any burger to new heights.” (\$20)

