



Taste Odyssey

There was a time when the closest the Humphrey family's famous popcorn balls ever got to outer space was in the sticky hands of kids riding Euclid Beach Park's silver rocket-ship ride. But in December, the crispy treats hitched a ride on space shuttle Discovery, bound for the International Space Station, as a Christmas snack for Euclid-born astronaut Suni Williams.

Though Williams' family moved to Massachusetts when she was just a year old, her mother Bonnie Zalokar says her daughter became a big fan of the tasty treats during return visits to see grandma. "We would always stop and get the popcorn balls," she says. "My mother would send them too. It was [Suni's] favorite."

When NASA asked Williams what fresh-food items she's like to bring with her into space, she specifically requested the treat. Unbeknownst to Williams, who will be spending six months aboard the International Space Station,

when NASA asked her mother for care package requests, she too requested that the popcorn balls be included.

Both NASA and Zalokar called Betsy Humphrey — she and her husband are the Humphrey Co.'s fourth-generation owners — for assistance in the matter. The Humphreys were happier than Laughing Sal to honor the request. They were first asked to send a sample to the NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston, where standard microbiological tests were performed on the popcorn ball to determine shelf

life, caloric content and the risk of food-borne illness for examination, says NASA spokesman William Jeffs. When the official OK was given, the Hum-



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phreys began their preparations. Because of limited space, the Humphreys chose to send the sweet and crunchy original popcorn ball flavor in a 3-inch snack size, meticulously wrapped to stay fresh in the space shuttle's holding containers.

Each astronaut care package is about the size of a shoebox, Zalokar says, and Williams was allowed three for the trip. Along with the popcorn balls, her care packages contained Slovenian smoked sausages, caramels, a family photo album and baseball paraphernalia from the Indians and Red Sox (we'll let that last one slide).

Jeffs says there were also Swedish foods (moose pâté, Swedish candies and cookies) for Christer Fuglesang, Spanish meats for Mike Lopez-Alegria and Japanese foods for Ed Lu — all fellow members of Williams' Discovery crew — on board for this mission.

"Nearly every astronaut requests some special foods that go into the shuttle fresh-food container or the International Space Station bonus containers," Jeffs says. "If the food is microbiologically safe to eat and will not be too difficult to eat in microgravity and has a shelf life of at least a few days, the request is honored."

While Jeffs says NASA never anticipated any problems with the popcorn balls, Humphrey

says she was somewhat concerned prior to launch about the inevitable crumbling that accompanies eating of one of her family's creations.

"They're sort of messy," she says. "Usually, the easiest way to clean up is to let the dog in the room." — *Tori Woods*