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'Why did we wait so long?'

Local bakeries react to FDA ban on Red Dye No. 3

Color additive used for popular foods, confections linked to cancer

By Kyla Woodard
kyla@claytodayonline.com

CLAY COUNTY - Following a long battle for most food and health connoisseurs, on Wednesday, Jan. 15, marked a new step forward in the world of healthy living.

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced it would ban the use of FD&C Red No. 3 in food and ingested drugs.

The synthetic color additive, used to give products a bright, cherry red appeal—think a slice of red velvet cake or the maraschino cherry in your cocktail—was found to be linked to cancer.

The dye is most commonly found in popular confections and products, like cookies, frostings, cakes and candies. But, it could appear in some medicines, including acetaminophen.

With the recent decision, these products could begin to look a little different in the near future. And food businesses are weighing in.

For local bakers, food coloring is a key part of their craft. And many are saying



PHOTO BY RONMAR LACAMIENTO/PEXELS

Red Dye No. 3 is a color additive used in popular foods and confections, such as red velvet cake. The FDA recently banned the dye due to its link to cancer.

the ban of this particular ingredient is a long time coming.

"I think it's definitely a step in the right direction, but I think we definitely have more work to do," said Melissa Jonyka, owner of Hyssop and Honey Sourdough Bakery in Middleburg.

Gail Whitehead, owner of Grandma Gail's Dough House in Green Cove Springs, has been following the potential ban since raising her children in the 1980s, when

studies first linked the dye to thyroid cancer found in lab rats.

The dye was eventually banned from cosmetics in 1990, but remained legal in food products.

"Why did we wait so long?," Whitehead said. "I mean, it clearly has been a problem for a very long time."

Jonyka said it's saddening to see the effect that artificial preservatives as a

SEE RED DYE, 8

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Sheriff Cook to build on agency's successes during next 4 years

By Don Coble
don@claytodayonline.com

CLAY COUNTY – Crime is down in Clay County compared to years past. For the first time in a decade, the Clay County Sheriff's Office is getting more applications than it has openings, which allows it to be more selective about who it hires. And the community's perception of the agency is more favorable than in years.

So, after winning re-election two months ago with 79.4% of the vote, things should be on autopilot for Sheriff Michelle Cook.

Hardly. The Clay County Sheriff's Office is just getting started.

She said her agency would focus on three primary categories in the next four years: growth and strengthening the bond between the community and her agency.

"As we continue to grow in Clay County, the law enforcement needs of the county grow, too," Cook said. "We handled over 275,000 calls for service in 2024. As people keep moving in and people keep calling the police, we have to have the personnel to respond.

"Growth is one thing you'll hear me talk about – recruiting, retention, the smart use of technology.

"The second priority is relationships. We have our Sheriff's Net meetings a couple of times a month, Coffee with a Cop – all of those things because it's important to let the community know what we're doing and to continue to keep that trust that our community has with us, and I don't take that for granted. It's like any relationship: you have to work on it, or the relationship goes sour. I take that very seriously."

Of course, the sheriff's office's primary job is fighting crime. While the population increased by 6.2% during Cook's first four years in office, violent crime decreased by 5.2% during that same timeframe.



One of her long-range goals is strengthening the bond between the community and her agency. Sheriff Michelle Cook doesn't just make appearances as the face of CCSO, she keeps her law enforcement credentials current.

"I'm happy to report that overall, our crime numbers are down from 2024," Cook said. "But, as we continue to grow, we must be laser-focused on what crime trends we're seeing and what's happening, putting the resources together to address those concerns. My major initiatives for 2025 are recruiting and retention back at the top. We have positions to fill. We have over 900 members, and not because of the school district transition, but partially because we had to put our hiring on hold just a little bit to get all those folks [into the schools]. We need to fill the spots we have opened. You'll hear me talking about a lot about recruiting and retention.

"You'll see the body-worn camera program roll out this year, which I'm really excited about. We've been very deliberate about our approach for a couple of reasons. One, it's a big investment. Two, we



had the infrastructure to address internally to ensure we were prepared. You know, the body-worn camera program is not just about putting a camera on a body. There are storage requirements, retention requirements, and public records requirements. There's, you know, maintenance of the cameras and all the equipment that goes with it. And it's an investment. We have to create a body-worn camera unit just to keep up with all of that. So that'll be three, four or five people. Then we had to have a space to put those people in. So, you know, but you'll see us rolling out our first 50 cameras here soon."

Cook has pressed the Board of County Commission for a safety complex that would expand the current jail facility and eliminate 30 buildings her agency needs to work and store equipment. The current jail and sheriff's office at 825 N. Orange Ave. in

Green Cove Springs was built in 1972 and is outdated and cramped. Many inmates sleep on mattresses on the floor, and some are sent to neighboring counties – at a cost – when there isn't enough space, even on cell floors or hallways.

Cook told county council members recently her agency is spread among 30 buildings around the county. She said first responders desperately need a 50-to-60-acre complex where the sheriff's office, fire rescue, 911 department, emergency management and fleet maintenance would all work under one roof to improve services.

"The jail is falling apart around us," she said. "I'm concerned that we don't pull the trigger on this sooner than later, there's not going to be any space left out there to put this together."

Instead of enjoying her agency's successes during the last four years, Michelle Cook said the Clay County Sheriff's Office wants so much more.



CLAY TODAY ARCHIVES

Sheriff Michelle Cook recently agreed to work with the Alachua, Bradford and Putnam County Sheriff Offices in the Four-Corner areas.

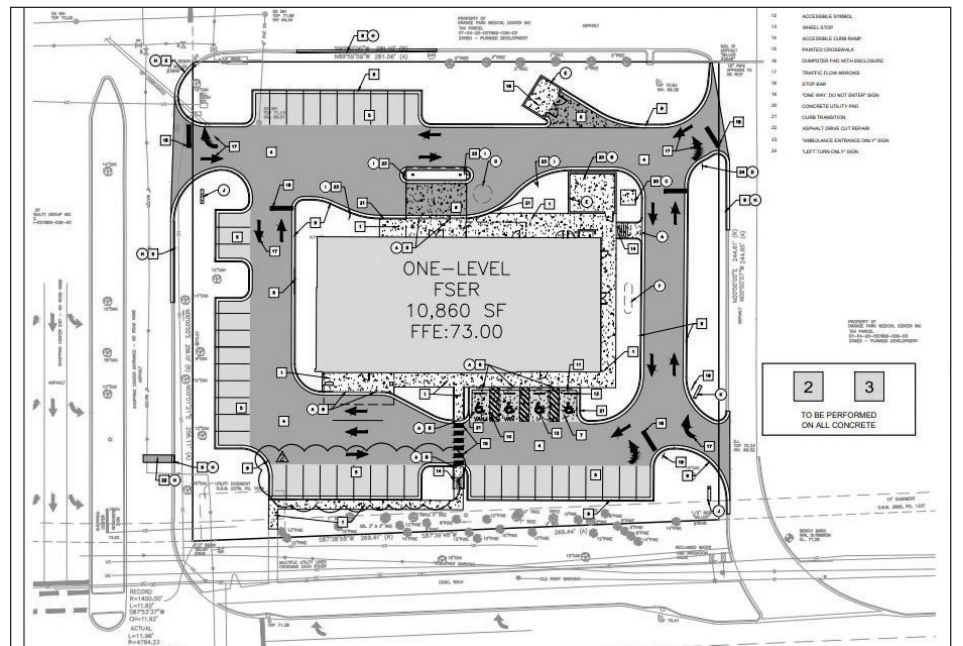
HCA Florida Orange Park Hospital plans to build new Emergency Room at Oakleaf Commons

For Clay Today

OAKLEAF – HCA Florida Orange Park Hospital has site plans to build an Emergency Room at the Oakleaf Commons on Oakleaf Plantation Parkway and First Coast Expressway.

According to the site plan, “This project is a ground-up construction of a new one-story building of approximately 10,860 square feet to be used as an 11-treatment room freestanding emergency department. This emergency department includes a

waiting area, exam rooms, trauma, lab, nurse station, restrooms, and associated spaces. The project includes two covered entry canopies, one for emergency vehicle access and one for public drop off as separate entities from the main building. An awning will go from the ambulance entrance to the decontamination room. There are separate enclosures on site for the generator and dumpster.”



Animal Hospital at Oakleaf Plantation
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Community Foundation has several scholarship options for students



For Clay Today

CLAY COUNTY – The Community Foundation will accept applications for its 2025 College Scholarships through March 14. The foundation offers several scholarships each year that benefit Northeast Florida students seeking post-secondary degrees. Before you begin your application, the foundation encourages students to complete the Free Application for Federal Aid (FAFSA) to determine their expected family income (EFC).

However, if you cannot complete the FAFSA, you can still apply. You can find answers to frequently asked questions about the FAFSA at studentaid.gov. You can also talk to your high school guidance department and/or college/university admissions office. Additionally, it encourages students to review the College Scorecard, which can be found at collegescorecard.ed.gov. College Scorecard allows students to evaluate the cost of attendance at their preferred institution. It also provides key information about student outcomes post-graduation. The FAFSA and College Scorecard are nationally used tools that

can aid students in getting a detailed picture of how much their education will cost.

The following scholarships are available:

BYON M. MORRIS SCHOLARSHIP

The Byon M. Morris Scholarship will provide \$4,800 (\$1,200 a year for four years) to support tuition, books, fees, room and board and degree-related expenses for one graduating senior who has attained Scouting's highest ranks. One Eagle Scout (Boy Scouts) or Gold Award winner (Girl Scouts) who demonstrates an aptitude and desire to succeed will receive the scholarship. In selecting the successful candidate, the review committee will consider academic achievements, leadership experience, desire for personal growth and financial need. All applicants must have at least a cumulative 3.0 grade point average (weighted) and plan to attend an accredited post-secondary institution full-time.

SAM AND LYDIA PAYNE SCHOLARSHIP

The Sam and Lydia Payne Scholarship will provide financial assistance for three

students graduating from a North Florida public or private school who demonstrate an aptitude and desire to succeed. The scholarship will support tuition and books, up to \$12,000 (\$3,000 a year for years), provided the recipient meets the eligibility requirements. All applicants must have a cumulative 2.2-3.5 (weighted) grade point average and plan to take a full-time course load to pursue a bachelor's degree. In selecting the successful candidate, the review committee will consider a desire for personal growth and financial need.

ELIZABETH EDGAR HALL CORPORATION SCHOLARSHIPS

Elizabeth Edgar Hall Corporation empowers women's economic success by providing scholarships to women completing either an undergraduate or graduate degree from one of the following Jacksonville institutions: Edward Waters University (EWU), Jacksonville University (JU), or University of North Florida (UNF). There are two scholarships available:

ELIZABETH EDGAR HALL FOUNDERS SCHOLARSHIP

The Elizabeth Edgar Hall Founders Scholarship will be awarded to one undergraduate female student who is completing/has recently completed her first year of undergraduate education and is on track to receive her bachelor's degree from Edward Waters University, Jacksonville University or University of North Florida. The award will be up to \$6,000 (\$2,000 yearly for three years), provided the recipient meets the eligibility requirements. Housed at The Community Foundation for Northeast Florida.

DELLA M. LEVY SCHOLARSHIP FOR GRADUATE STUDIES

The Della M. Levy Scholarship for Graduate Studies will award one female student who has completed her undergraduate studies and is pursuing a full-time graduate degree from JU or UNF. The award of \$4,500 can be used to support tuition, books, and other college-related expenses in coordination with your Office of Financial Aid's Cost of Attendance.

Questions regarding application support can be directed to Nikki MacPhee, Development and Donor Services Associate, at nmacphee@jaxcf.org or (904) 356-4483.

Crews clearing land for new Walmart Supercenter in Oakleaf

For Clay Today

OAKLEAF – Walmart is clearing the way on a 63.6-acre site for a Supercenter with a liquor store and eight out parcels at 10000 Omni Ave. at the southwest corner of First Coast Expressway on the Duval County side of Oakleaf Plantation Parkway at the Clay County line.

The City of Jacksonville is reviewing proposed site plans for a gas station and car wash on 1.83 acres, with the out parcels ranging from .99 acres to 1.48 acres.

Walmart estimates the cost to be \$18.5 million, and the size of the Supercenter will be 175,360 square feet with 778 parking spots.



Word OF THE WEEK

Word of the Week is a feature that aims to help readers boost their vocabulary in a meaningful way that has practical application. Each week, our editorial staff presents a word, its definition and its use in a sentence.

Inimitable: (in-im-e-te-bel) an adjective that means impossible to duplicate or unique and beyond imitation.



The county is accepting applications from groups who'd like to participate in Adopt-A-Mile and Adopt-A-Spot to clean up roadways, parks, boat ramps and trails as part of the Keep Clay Beautiful program. Contact the county's Community Services Department for more information.

Sign up for Adopt-a-Mile, Adopt-a-Spot to Keep Clay Beautiful

For Clay Today

CLAY COUNTY – Want to get more involved and make a positive change in your neighborhood this new year, Clay County's Adopt-a-Mile or Adopt-a-Spot programs may be a perfect opportunity.

It's part of the county's Keep Clay Beautiful program, an affiliate of Keep America Beautiful and Keep Florida Beautiful and part of our Clay County Community and Social Services Department. The goal is to preserve our county's pristine, natural beauty - and keep Clay beautiful.

You can join as a part of an organization or create your group.

You can round up a few friends, choose a team name, and fill out a form, and we'll help match you with any of these spots to clean up roadsides, boat ramps, parks and trails. We'll also give your team a special shoutout by putting up a sign with your team name at your adopted spot.

The areas with the highest needs are County Road 218, CR 225, CR 315, CR 214, CR 217, CR 352, CR 220 (Henley Road to Middleburg High), CR 226, Old Jennings Road and Long Bay Road.

There are seven simple steps you can follow to sign up.

- Call (904) 529-4256, fill out the sponsor form at claycountygov.com/community/community-services/keep-clay-beautiful or email volunteer@claycountygov.com.
- Tell the county the areas your group is interested in improving.
- The county will find your team a community area to clean.
- The county will happily assemble a written agreement for your group.
- The county will work together to establish a cleaning schedule.
- A "Keep Clay Beautiful" sign with your team's name will be put up.
- Great resources like our To-Go kits will be available to your group.

High school seniors can apply for Farah & Farah scholarships

For Clay Today

CLAY COUNTY – In partnership with the Florida Prepaid College Foundation and Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of Florida, the scholarship recognizes five outstanding high school students with a two-year college scholarship.

"We're thrilled to continue to support the next generation of exceptional leaders with this scholarship," said Eddie Farah, founding partner of Farah & Farah. One of the highlights of my year is informing these deserving young individuals that they have received the scholarship, which covers their first two years of college.

This year's scholarship is the product

of a collaboration between Farah & Farah, Big Brothers Big Sisters Association of Florida and the Florida Prepaid College Foundation. The partnership with Big Brothers Big Sisters underscores the importance of mentorship in a young person's life. By providing financial support for higher education, Farah & Farah hope to further empower these young people to achieve their dreams.

Scholarship winners receive a Florida Prepaid College Foundation Two-Year College Plan that covers tuition and most fees for 60 credit hours at any Florida public college. The plan value can also be applied to universities or trade schools in Florida.

In order to qualify, students need to be

currently enrolled in a public or charter high school in Florida, demonstrate a stellar commitment to their communities and the classroom, and meet additional eligibility criteria. Scholarship recipients will be announced in May.

Each year, a scholarship committee assesses submitted applications using a comprehensive framework. The top 10% of these applicants will advance to a final selection round with reviews from a distinguished panel of judges, including recognized leaders in their communities and respective fields, as well as past scholarship recipients.

Students can submit their applications through the Big Brothers Big Sisters Asso-



ciation of Florida online application portal or farahandfarah.com/scholarship. The deadline is Feb. 18. For more information, visit farahandfarah.com/scholarship or email scholarships@farahandfarah.com.

Oakleaf's KinderCare's Isabel Molina earns Early Learning Coalition Teacher of the Year honor

For Clay Today

ST. JOHNS COUNTY – Celebrating excellence in early education, the Early Learning Coalition of North Florida announced its 2024 Teacher of the Year winners. Honored for their creativity, dedication and passion for teaching young children, this year's award recipients were Isabel Molina, Infant/Toddler Teacher of the Year from KinderCare in Oakleaf and Shelley Maurer, Preschool Teacher of the Year from Baker Pre-K Center in Macclenny.

Both teachers were recognized during a surprise visit recently with balloons, flowers and a special guest Pete the Cat. They will also be honored at the upcoming ELC Early Educators Conference on Jan. 25 at the Thrasher-Horne Conference Center. Each will receive a \$500 cash prize generously sponsored by Kaplan Early Learning

and the Clay Electric Foundation.

The Early Learning Coalition of North Florida (ELC) understands that early childhood educators play a crucial role in shaping the future by nurturing young minds during their most formative years. Teachers who demonstrate creativity, dedication and a genuine love for their craft lay the foundation for lifelong learning and success.

To celebrate and honor these outstanding professionals, ELC proudly recognizes exceptional educators from across its six-county service area. The annual Preschool Teacher of the Year Award, now in its 10th year, highlights the remarkable contributions of teachers who go above and beyond to inspire their students and set a standard of excellence in early education.

"Exceptional teachers have the power

to transform lives, especially during the critical early years of development," said Dawn Bell, CEO of the Early Learning Coalition of North Florida. "With this being the 10th annual Preschool Teacher of the Year Award, we are proud to continue honoring educators who bring creativity, passion and dedication into the classroom. Their commitment inspires not only their students but also the entire early learning community."

The Early Learning Coalition of North Florida is the leading voice in six counties for parents of children from birth through 5 years of age. ELC works with many other local agencies to ensure that all families have access to quality, affordable childcare. Their mission is achieved by leading projects that increase the quality and availability of childcare professionals and advocate for childcare policies that posi-



Isabel Molina, center, was surprised at KinderCare in Oakleaf when she learned she was recognized by the Early Learning Coalition of North Florida as its Infant/Toddler Teacher of the Year.

tively impact the lives of children and families. To learn more about the Early Learning Coalition of North Florida and how to assist in ensuring quality child care for all families, visit us at elcnorthflorida.org.

Sugar and Kiley

Local FFA youth prepares young heifer for this year's Clay County Agricultural Fair

By Kyla Woodard
kyla@claytodayonline.com

Leading up to April's Clay County Agricultural Fair livestock show and auction, Clay Today will be highlighting some young farmers and their journeys.

This week, we follow Kiley Taylor and her young heifer Sugar.

Taylor has been raising and showing

her Maine-Angus cow for two years now, garnering many awards throughout her time—including Reserve Grand Champion with Showmanship and First Place Herdsman.

Having a flawless walk, showing confidence and building a close bond with her cow, are things Taylor said she practices daily.



STAFF PHOTOS BY KYLA WOODARD

Kiley Taylor and her young heifer Sugar.

As a member of Middleburg High's FFA chapter and an avid animal lover, Taylor knows just what it means to be the perfect showman.

And she said being apart of the program has allowed her to blossom by being able to do what she loves and find others who share the same passion.



Having a flawless walk and being the perfect showman are some things that Taylor practices with Sugar.

From feeding to meticulous grooming, Taylor said her experience with Sugar has taught her a lot about hard work and what it means to persevere.

"It's taught me definitely to work harder," Taylor said. "And you don't get what you want easily."

With Sugar soon to turn 3, Taylor said she won't be able to show her for much longer. Though she said she is far from done with the experience.



Taylor said she plans to continue showing heifers for future competitions.

"I probably want to get another heifer and show her until I'm too old," Taylor said.

Make sure to look out for Taylor and Sugar in the upcoming 4H/FFA Youth Beef Breeding Show!

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School district facing expansion, changes amid growing county

New schools, additional campus wings and future rezoning in the works

By Kyla Woodard
kyla@claytodayonline.com



STAFF PHOTO BY KYLA WOODARD

To accommodate county growth, the school district will be going through some changes in the near future.

CLAY COUNTY — While the county's population is bursting at the seams, providing educational opportunities is still a main priority for the school district.

"I'm as excited today as I've ever been about the future of Clay County schools," said Superintendent of Schools David Broskie.

Along with the county's road expansions and growth projects, schools also work to accommodate a growing need.

Following the completion of the First Coast Expressway, Broskie said that around 25,000 new homes are projected to be built in the next 10 years. This will add more than 6,000 additional students to the school system.

As a result, he said that tackling the development head-on is key.

"One of the things you'd like to do is you'd like to be fiscally responsible with the taxpayer dollars that are given," Broskie said. "So, you're looking for the best option to provide available seats and additional capacity, but do it in the most cost-effective way."

The county is getting bigger. With no

time to waste, some big plans are in the works, especially for the Lake Asbury and Oakleaf areas.

"For schools it's about short term, intermediate and long range planning," Broskie said.

Broskie said an additional wing will be added to Lake Asbury Junior High School on Sandridge Road. The wing will consist of 32 classrooms and accommodate about 640 more students.

Oakleaf Junior High School, on Plantation Oaks Boulevard, will also receive that same model. Both projects, which will cost approximately \$20 million each, are expected to be ready for the 2025-2026 school year.

Broskie said these middle schools will also begin providing sixth-grade education, which means some change for many students and parents.

"Some of our sixth graders from the elementary schools that feed into those schools, that are right at or slightly above their intended capacity, would be the students that would be going there," he said.

In a proposed boundary change, fifth-grade students at Discovery Oaks, Oakleaf Village, Plantation Oaks, Coppergate, Lake Asbury, RideOut and Shadowlawn elementary schools would attend either Oakleaf Junior or Lake Asbury Junior for their sixth-grade year.

Broskie said this sixth through eighth approach is used in 65 of Florida's 67 school districts.

Broskie said there are plans also to add a wing onto Rideout Elementary.

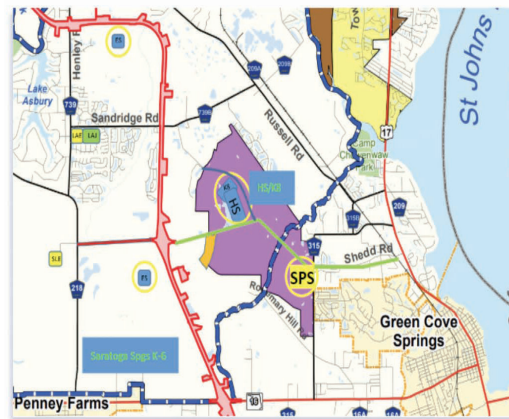
Broskie said the burgeoning Saratoga Springs community, located between Green Cove Springs and Lake Asbury, will bring even more development.

Looking into the future, the district expects to build two brand new schools in that area, a high school and an elementary school, by 2030 and 2032, respectively.

"New high school costs range anywhere from \$150 million to \$200 million to build a new high school," Broskie said. "So, that's a huge expense."

Governors Park is projected to gain a

New School Projections



SCHOOL	NUMBER OF STUD'S	PROJECTED OPEN
"RRR" Saratoga Spgs *High School	2500	Aug 2030
"AA" Governors Park *K-8	1,275	Aug 2031 (Tentatively)
"C" Saratoga Spgs K-6	862	Aug 2032 (Tentatively)

PHOTO COURTESY OF ONE CLAY

The district expects to build brand new schools in the Saratoga Springs and Governors Park communities.

kindergarten through eighth-grade school by 2031.

Although overwhelming, Broskie said he believes part of the reason for the growth is that it attests to the school district's success and impact, and he plans to keep it that way.

"Clay County itself is blessed to have a great school district. We're an A-rat-

ed school district. We're an academically high-performing school district. We recently released our 95% graduation rate, which is the highest in the history of Clay County," Broskie said. "And that's a lot to be proud of."

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RED DYE

from page 1

whole have had on society. According to Tilley Distribution, artificial flavorings and dyes are more cost effective and able to meet demand, in turn, making the products cheaper options for consumers.

“It really affects lower income families and especially children,” she said. “And, I think that’s the worst part. It’s just almost predatory.”

According to the National Library of Medicine, artificial food colorings are also linked to attention-deficit and hyperactivity in children.

Because of this, baker Gabrielle Dawson said she eliminated it from her chil-

dren’s diet around five years ago.

Although they said the ban is a big win for the food industry, concerns still linger about the greater effect it could have on business. And with Valentine’s Day around the corner, the color will be in high demand.

Life’s a Batch owner Holly Rowan said she has mixed feelings. She said on one hand, she agrees with the ban. However, she feels that the more expensive alternatives could bring a big financial change for her customers.

“There’s going to be a lot of people that don’t care, they’re going to want their cake a certain color. Especially probably at Christmas time,” Rowan said. “And it’s going to make it harder to accomplish that.

Or, are they going to want to pay the price it’s going to take to create that color.”

Jonyka said she thinks the ban will definitely hurt the food industry as a whole.

“I think it will definitely hurt the big food industry, just because they only care about the bottom line,” Jonyka said. “But, I do hope this pushes them to make changes in other ways too, like cutting out other dyes like red 40, yellow 5, blue dyes and all of that stuff.

SORBATE PRESERVATIVE, COTTON SEED LECITHIN, UNSWEETENED CHOCOLATE, MONOGLYCERIDES, EGG WHITE, NATURAL FLAVOR. IF DECORATOR ICING IN THE FOLLOWING ARTIFICIAL COLOR DYES: YELLOW 5, YELLOW 6, RED 3, RED 40, BLUE 1, BLUE 2).

011.

CONTAINS MILK, WHEAT, EGG & SOY INGREDIENTS

Local bakers said it’s important to read the label of whatever it is you are purchasing. U.S. manufacturers have until 2027 and 2028 to reformulate food and drug products containing the dye.

Making the product taste good is one thing, but co-owner of Rummies and Yummies Bakery and Coffee shop in Orange Park, Amy Hales said giving customers the ‘look’ that they desire is something that she and other bakers pride themselves in.

“If you want to give people a red velvet cake and it doesn’t look red, people tend to not buy it,” Hales said.

She said it’s important to make food the the right way.



PHOTO COURTESY OF GABRIELLE DAWSON

Gabrielle Dawson is the owner of Bless Your Heart Bakery. She said that in making cakes like this one, she uses natural dyes as an alternative.

“It’s going to be just making sure that, again, validating any kind of coloring that I have, does not have any of the proposed banned ones or anything else that may be deemed harmful,” Hales said.

Dawson said even with less artificial food colorings on the shelves, getting the look that your customers want is still possible.

Since opening Bless Your Heart Bakery in Middleburg five years ago, Dawson said she’s way ahead of the curve, already using natural dyes as an alternative.

“I have several customers who already order dye free stuff from me. So, I do know what brands work,” she said.

According to Instructables, some ways to achieve a natural red color is by using concentrated beet juice, berries or rhubarb.

Dawson said brands like TruColor and Supernatural Kitchen are perfect for this.

U.S. manufacturers will need to reformulate food and drug products containing the dye by 2027 and 2028, respectively.

Until then, the bakers noted how it’s important to pay attention to the labels of the products you buy.

“I just hope somehow, someday, as a society we just become better educated on what we’re putting in our bodies, what we’re putting in our own kid’s bodies,” Jonyka said.



Red Dye No. 3 can also be found in many frozen deserts.



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