

HOME

BY CHRISTA GALA

Sweet

HOME-BASED

BUSINESS

The concept of creating a business from scratch and growing it into something successful is the American Dream. Two families in Apex have done just that. But starting and running a home-based business is a lot of work and, often, a successful first year simply means breaking even (meaning there's no paycheck for you). Here, we explore two home-based companies that we think have the determination and the staying power to make it big. How did they get started and what are they doing to stay afloat?

PEPPER DOG SALSA

Tom Molthen, 45, started making his own salsa a few years ago due to a bumper crop of peppers he'd planted. Little did he know, fate was preparing him for a unique journey.

"I grew three different types of peppers in containers initially, and they sprouted like crazy. I thought, 'What am I going to do with all of these peppers?' I love peppers so I started making salsa," says Tom. "The first batch I made about three-and-a-half years ago was hideous. All it was was heat."

So Tom experimented and tried adding onions, which gave the salsa a gelatinous texture. But Tom kept trying. Each summer the couple went on an annual beach trip with family. Each summer, family members from across the country said the salsa was getting better. The last summer the verdict was unanimous: He should sell it. Tom attributes the perfected product to a secret ingredient, which of course he won't divulge.

"I came across something, and I put it in and it just exploded," he says. Soon folks at work were devouring every jar Tom brought in. With a successful salsa recipe under his belt, fate dealt Tom Molthen two very unpleasant blows. First, he was laid off from his job at a local communications company. Second, he learned a herniated disk was pressing on his spinal cord. He was starting to lose motor function and feeling in his extremities. Doctors said surgery was imminent or he risked paralysis.

The surgery took place immediately. Tom was in the hospital for a month and developed complications, including a pulmonary embolism in each lung.

"I was a basketcase," says Tom's wife, Ginger Molthen, 42. The couple has two young children, now three and five-and-a-half. Ginger had been a stay-at-home mom, so the family had no income. As Tom was healing, family members encouraged him again to look into selling his salsa. After all, recovering from surgery wouldn't allow him to sit in a chair all day like he did in his previous job, but making salsa was something he could do.

Together, the Molthens decided to give it a try. They brought 10 cases of Pepper Dog Salsa to Apex's Today and Yesteryear festival in September and sold every jar. They suspected they were onto something.

ON THE ROAD

Soon after, the Molthens packed up their minivan with Pepper Dog Salsa and started visiting every specialty store they could find. Ginger's parents helped take care of the children while they traveled.

"A Southern Season was the first store," says Ginger. "We have to just absolutely say that God has directed us every step of the way. Things happened that shouldn't have happened. We walked into A Southern Season with our little box of salsa looking for the grocery manager."

Surprisingly, the Molthens found him right away. He tasted the product: "Now that's good salsa," he said. Just like that, the Molthens had their first sale and also a tagline for their label, which, incidentally was designed by Ginger Molthen's stepmother. She came up with the mascot too—a howling dog made up of green, red and yellow chili peppers.

FIND PEPPER DOG SALSA

Currently sold at these local spots:



Piggyback Market
A Southern Season
Whole Foods (NC stores only)
Sunflowers, on Hwy. 751
Chatham Market Place in Pittsboro
Peanut Roaster in Cary
NC Farmer's Market
RDU Airport
Foster's Market
Weaver Street Market

Order online at igourmet.com,
southernthings.com and carolinasauc.com.

Visit the company website at
www.pepperdogsalsa.com for more info.



During their travels, the Molthen's found that A Southern Season's reputation carried a lot of weight. It proved an entrée into many other outlets, to date 25 stores total in North Carolina, Virginia and Washington D.C.

What they need, says Ginger, is a big contract. They're currently talking with Whole Foods (and they did just get approval to be in the chain's North Carolina stores) and Earth Fare, not to mention a large specialty store based out of New York City, but the red tape of going through corporate offices to get their salsa approved is tiresome.

Like many first-year businesses, the Molthens aren't losing money, and they're making steady gains in terms of customers, but they're not yet able to pay themselves either. For now, they're relying on money in their savings account, IRAs and 401Ks to see them through.

But Ginger says she and Tom decided early on to "give it to God and not worry about it too much. At times of frustration, we'll get home, and two or three stores have called. Different things have happened that are just amazing. We just need to keep working through and be patient."

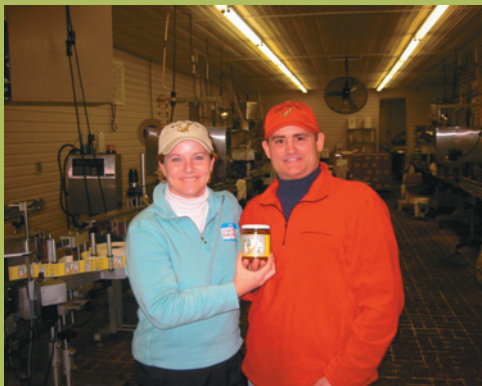
OUT OF THE KITCHEN

The Molthens have accomplished a lot in less than a year. Ginger contacted North Carolina State University's Department of Food Science and sent it a sample of the salsa. For \$100, the agency analyzed the salsa and sent back a report advising the Molthens how to cook and seal the product for preservation; it also included a nutritional breakdown of the product.

The couple looked into hiring a trademark attorney to rightfully claim the Pepper Dog logo Ginger's stepmother created, but it would set them back \$3,000, by one estimate. No matter, Ginger did it herself, answering the questionnaire and submitting all the proper materials. "They called us back a few months later to approve it, saying 'We love your dog.'"

Once those two things were accomplished, the Molthens were ready to get the cooking part of the business out of their kitchen. The hot peppers often made the kids sneeze and cough. Luckily, the Molthens found a bottler in Louisburg that cooks and bottles the product. The couple still do all of the accounting and sales work from their home.

Both feel it's only a matter of time before the Pepper Dog starts wagging its tail pretty hard. ♦



Ginger and Tom Molthen show off a jar of their Pepper Dog Salsa

AS SEEN IN



CaryLiving
MAGAZINE