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Growth Strategies



Curt Campbell of Curt's Spice Co. & Oilerie, Fish Creek, fills a bottle with one of many varieties of olive oil at his store. In addition to the olive oil, Curt's sells spices, olives, salsa, dips, chips, and glassware. The Business News photo by J.A. Robb

Fish Creek spice business strikes oil

Started with table spice in 1992, now one of nation's largest olive oil retailers

By Kristin Stankewicz

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Curt Campbell founded Curt's Spice Company in 1992 with two things: a tasty table spice concoction and a knack for marketing. Today, the Fish Creek company offers a variety of spices and specialty food products, including a unique olive oil "bar" concept called Oilerie.

To get his spice into the marketplace, "I went to all the small, family-owned restaurants around — the breakfast, lunch, and dinner places — and they put it on the tables," Campbell said.

Customers fell for the spice, which

Campbell describes as a Creole-Italian blend, with salt, pepper, garlic, onion, thyme, oregano, and more. "Curt's came along at just the right time, when there started to be demand for more flavoring around this area," he said.

The spice packaging lists numerous usage suggestions, including hamburger, eggs, popcorn, and "your mother-in-law's cooking."

"That line has sold us more table spice," he said. "Lots of it got sold as a joke — it was given to someone's mother-in-law, but then they used it and really liked it."

Campbell calls his spices, which retail for under \$3 each, an affordable luxury. "Everyday food items get more special," he said.

A self-taught marketer, Campbell used his

skills to cost-effectively build his business.

"I didn't have a million dollars," he said. "I knew I had to get it into the hands of consumers."

For 10 years, he and his dachshund, Sammi, drove 40,000 miles each year delivering his products to restaurants and gift shops throughout Wisconsin.

Taking his cue from a mustard company that started making pretzels, Campbell created tortilla chips to showcase his spices.

It was an inexpensive way to get the spice into their mouths," he said.

The popularity of the chips led to other related products including salsa, queso, and bean dip, all developed by Campbell and

contracted out for production.

Campbell executed a number of other creative marketing strategies, including demos at Door County orchards, local gift shops, and Cooks Corner in Manitowoc. He also entered — and won — a Green Bay barbeque and ribs cook-off contest.

In 2003, Campbell and wife, Amy Jo, rented a small commercial cottage in Fish Creek and started selling their products retail.

Door County tourists embraced the shop right away. "The spices are a cheap souvenir," he said. "And once they get home, they can reorder it online."

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Spice/Olive oil tastings offered in shop

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Their shop was thriving, but during a trip to Europe in 2003 the Campbells noticed a trend that would quickly change the focus of their business: boutiques selling olive oil and vinegar. They decided to introduce a similar concept in Fish Creek.

That side of their business, called Oilerie, launched in May 2004. The idea was a hit from the start.

"In three weeks, we turned our whole inventory over," he said. "People just loved it."

By the end of 2005, 18,000 bottles of olive oil were sold over the counter. "We're the largest single-store retailer of extra virgin olive oil and balsamic vinegar in the U.S.," Campbell said.

In order to protect himself from copycats, Campbell registered federal service marks for "Oilerie" and "Olive Oil Bar."

Campbell already has a few competitors, including Oil & Vinegar, a Dutch chain with a location in Milwaukee's Mayfair Mall.

Like some California wineries that are starting to dabble in olive oils, these shops feature gourmet products with big price tags, Campbell said.

"They're shooting themselves in the foot by having a \$35 bottle of olive oil. You're not going to use that every day; you're going to save it for special occasions. That's a tremendous opportunity wasted," he said.

Oilerie's oils average around \$12.

To encourage people to try different olive oil flavors, Campbell conducts olive oil tastings in the shop, similar to a wine tasting.

"Everyone likes different flavors, just like with wine," he said.

Campbell thinks the rise in popularity of TV cooks such as Rachel Ray — who frequently raves about extra-virgin olive oil, or "EVOO," as she calls it — has prompted more customers to try olive oil.

"When those cooks talk about it on their shows, we hear it the next day," he said.

The Campbells believe olive oil has so much potential that they are finalizing plans to

franchise the Oilerie concept. "We think this is the next Starbucks," he said.

According to Campbell, the backbone of Curt's Spice Company — for both the spices and the olive oils — is helping customers know what to do with the products once they're home.

He personally chats with customers about his products, and offers plenty of free samples and recipes. "Once I start talking to someone, I noticed everyone else in the shops starts listening in," he said.

The popularity of the Campbells' shop, now located in the Shops at Barringer Crossing on Main Street, is visible. "There are cars in the lot when we open at 10:00 a.m., and there are cars coming in after we close at 5:00 p.m.," he said.

Although most of his attention is focused on Oilerie these days, Campbell isn't giving up on the spices that got him started. He doesn't advertise them other than on the packaging, but people are still hooked.

"I can't ever get rid of the spices. That would kill people," he said, laughing.

Businesses can meet with overseas trade directors at Neenah conference

Fox Valley businesses thinking of exporting their products or services can arrange free one-on-one consultations May 10 with Department of Commerce overseas trade directors at an international trade conference to be held 11 a.m.-4 p.m. at the Bridgewood Resort & Conference Center, Neenah.

"If you've been contemplating entering or expanding your share of export markets, this conference provides you with a great opportunity to learn from professionals who work in these markets," said Commerce Secretary Mary Burke.

Admission to the event, which includes lunch, is \$25.

The directors will speak at several events and will be available for free one-on-one consultations

To register or meet with our overseas directors, contact Brad Schneider at (920) 420-1796 or e-mail brad.schneider@wisconsin.gov.