

BRINGING HOME

With the help of a poorly aimed whiffle ball, the risk takers at J&D Foods introduced the public to a new kind of salt—and seasoning may never be the same.

BY MARLOW RILEY



THE DREAM BEGAN, AS MANY DO, WITH A cocktail. Fat Alley BBQ in Telluride, Colo., had created a signature drink: the Mitch Morgan. “It was the embodiment of awesome,” says Dave Lefkow, co-founder of J&D Foods. “It was a shot of bourbon with a bacon garnish; instead of a straw sticking out of the bourbon, think bacon. It was a little excessive.”

Excessive, perhaps, but it left quite an impression. Lefkow and Justin Esch—his business partner—both Midwestern transplants living in the Pacific Northwest, became friends while working for the Seattle-based tech company Jobster in 2006. While the two were on a speaking tour of the Southeast in 2007, Esch mentioned an idea that was inspired by the Mitch Morgan: a seasoning that tastes like bacon.

“I didn’t know if he was serious about it or not, but he mentioned the words bacon and salt together to me in a sentence and I almost jumped out of my chair,” Lefkow says. “My first response was that everything



Justin Esch (left) and Dave Lefkow with Bacon Salt

THE BACON



should taste like bacon. In the Midwest, everybody knows that.”

That same night, the two found themselves in front of a computer in a Miami hotel lobby, starting a company. They decided right then that their dream had to happen.

“We locked ourselves into it because we registered the domain and dropped \$300 on a trademark application at 2 or 3 in the morning,” Lefkow says. “It’s like when people wake up married in Vegas in a tuxedo. We went out and started a company, but woke up and still thought it was a good idea. There are worse things to have happen.”

So a company existed, at least in name: They had a trademark and had prepared a tagline (“Everything should taste like bacon”), but what Esch and Lefkow didn’t have was any knowledge of food product preparation. The entrepreneurs refused to let this get in their way.

“We started to experiment with sea salt and bacon drippings in my kitchen, trying to make it ourselves, and it was horrible,” Lefkow says. “It tasted like you were sprinkling pure fat onto your egg. I like bacon drippings and scrambled eggs as much as the next guy, but that was disgusting. It was yellow, it was ugly, it probably had a shelf life of about a day and a half, and it clearly wasn’t going to work.

“We were clueless,” Lefkow continues

“We built a MySpace profile and a Facebook group and contacted anyone who said, ‘I love bacon’ on their profiles.”

“but being clueless is actually part of what’s made us successful. There were many people who said, ‘Don’t do this, you’re going to lose all your money’ and we just said, ‘Nah, it’ll be fine.’ It was one of those fortunate things where a lot of things fell into place for us.”

Eventually, they hired professionals and asked them to make a seasoning salt that tasted like “the smell of bacon frying on a Sunday morning.” After developing four flavors—original, hickory, peppered and the quickly rejected maple (“It was horrible,” Lefkow says)—all that was left to do was order a few thousand bottles and figure out how to pay for everything.

Enter an unlikely source of funding: “America’s Funniest Home Videos.” For Lefkow, getting hit in the head with a whiffle ball by his 3-year-old son may have been the best business move he ever made. “My wife was the one who goaded me to send the tape in,” Lefkow says. “Three weeks after we sent it in, we [found out] how much it was going to cost to make our first run, which was almost exactly \$5,000.” As luck would have it, that’s exactly the amount the video won.

Their low-cost marketing strategy was simple and intuitive: Use social networking media to spread bacon salt by word-of-mouth.

GOES WITH EVERYTHING The J&D Foods flavor family includes meat-flavored salt, mayonnaise and even lip balm.



"We built a MySpace profile and a Facebook group and contacted anyone who said, 'I love bacon' on their profiles—on MySpace there were about 37,000 people. We sent tiny samples of Bacon Salt to people who had blogs that were bacon-related," Lefkow says. The result "was complete insanity. We sold out of 3,000 jars of Bacon Salt in the first five days. We were completely unprepared for what hit us."

One basic principle has fueled their success: bucking conventional wisdom. "People told us we needed \$20 million to start a food company, and we did it for \$5,000," Lefkow says. "People also told us that you couldn't sell seasonings on QVC. In July we sold about 160,000 jars of Bacon Salt on QVC."

Over the course of 2008, J&D Foods managed to get Bacon Salt into close to 10,000 grocery stores, setting a spice category sales record at their first chain, the Bellevue, Wash.-based QFC. In October 2008, they created their second-most successful product, a bacon-mayonnaise hybrid called Baconnaise, which can now be found in 6,000 stores. Recently, they launched a few more: A bacon-flavored ranch dressing, microwavable popcorn called Bacon Pop and a bacon-flavored envelope called an "Mmm-velope."

"We've created things that people didn't know they needed," Lefkow says.

Like many noteworthy inventions, J&D's products have even received attention from the military. "We started getting e-mails from soldiers stationed in Iraq and Afghanistan and places where pork products are prohibited," Lefkow says. "That's when we launched Operation Bacon Salt; we sponsor a group of troops and send them free bacon salt and Baconnaise. That's been a really gratifying experience."

It looks like a pinch of salt goes a long way—especially when it tastes like bacon. **M**

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