

Rotary
Club of
Charlotte



THIS WEEK'S PROGRAM

October 12, 2021

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Bret Morey, owner of Xtreme Gourmet Sauces

“Heating up the Meeting”

By Rick Handford

Glenn Bouley, who spent a long time working in his family’s commercial printing business, was involved in marketing for them, which is where he met our speaker, Bret Morey. Bret had a career in creative advertising for over 30 years, working with the likes of Carowinds, The Charlotte Knights, the YMCAs, Hubbell Lighting, Capel Rugs, and many more, before undertaking to start up a company with his son, Elijah, to make and market a new brand of hot sauce. What Glenn really admires is not the great hot sauces, which have won some 56 awards in that category; not the high-tech marketing or the smoothly run warehouse operation; and not the incredibly fast-growing sales; but rather the fact that everyone in the business seems to be having a lot of fun!

The story of Elijah’s Extreme Hot Sauce began in the family garden when Elijah was six years old and asked his dad what he had to do to become the youngest person to eat the world’s hottest pepper. Not knowing quite how to react, Bret offered him a hot banana pepper and told him to start there. Elijah promptly ate the pepper, which sent him running for water to try to put out the fire. That began a passion for hot peppers and eventually for hot pepper sauces.

When he was 12, Elijah asked his dad if they could figure out a way to make a hot sauce that actually tasted good as well as being hot. Bret said “sure”, and so they started growing a wide variety of hot peppers in the garden. After three years of growing and experimenting with various mixtures of mash, they finally achieved their goal with a ghost pepper sauce that they called “Elijah’s Extreme”. To determine if they truly had a winner, they went out on Facebook and offered free samples to anyone who wanted one, with the condition that they get honest feedback about the sauce in return.

Of all the people who tried the sauce, only two didn’t like it—one that said it was too thick and one that said that there was not enough vinegar in the sauce. This was fine, as Bret and Elijah were looking to make a thicker sauce that wasn’t just spicy vinegar!

They decided to take it to market, but rather than have to set up and staff a commercial kitchen themselves, they found a company in Costa Rica that actually manufactured several sauces for others, and who agreed to make them the sauce from the Elijah’s Extreme recipe. After about eight months of samples coming in from Costa Rica and recipe tweaks going out in the other direction, they finally had a sauce that tasted like their home-made version, and they ordered a pallet’s worth, which arrived in June of 2014.

The *Gaston Gazette* was kind enough to do a full-page article about the arrival of their first pallet of the new hot sauce. In relatively short order, Bret and Elijah figured out that trying to sell the product directly to consumers was not going to be very productive (I happened to buy a bottle from them at the Charlotte Regional Farmer’s Market about that time—and liked it), so they each sent out emails to a variety of companies asking if they would like to use/sell their new sauce. Tijuana Flats and Bass Pro Shops were among the first to respond, and after a couple of months, Bass Pro Shops said that they wanted to sell the sauce in their stores nationwide, which is to say in every state except Hawaii. This opened the door to selling in other national chains, including Cabela’s among many others.

About this time, Elijah got to know Ed Currie, creator of the “Carolina Reaper”, judged to be the hottest pepper in the world, and Ed’s Company, the “PuckerButt Pepper Company”. This was how Elijah, age 16, finally got to eat the world’s hottest pepper! It also led to the creation of a new product, Elijah’s Extreme Reaper Sauce, which was a fruit-based sauce including blackberry, cranberry, and bourbon, that hit the market in 2016. Elijah wasn’t thrilled with the recipe at first, but now it is his favorite sauce, and also a favorite of the critics, having won 15 awards, vs 9 for the Ghost Pepper sauce. The Reaper sauce was followed in 2019 with the Elijah’s Extreme Regret Sauce (now their ‘hottest’ seller in both senses of the word), made with a combination of the Carolina Reaper and the Trinidad Scorpion peppers.

They began getting feedback to the effect that their pepper sauce was great, but was too hot for many people to enjoy. Bret and Elijah started researching the market for milder hot sauces, and found that there had not been a new mild product introduced in the last 50 years. So in 2020 they released Elijah’s Roasted Pepper sauce, followed by Elijah’s Habanero Pineapple-Mango

sauce; marketed without the word “Extreme” in the name, and with a bright yellow and green label as opposed to the black and red color scheme of the first three hot sauces.

In 2019, Elijah took over social media marketing for the company, and was very successful, with sales up 400% from 2019 to 2021. They also have just received their 57th and 58th awards, a great accomplishment for a company only six years old.

In the spring of 2020, they rented a 2,500-sf warehouse because their garage could no longer handle the load. They moved in on August 1, 2020, and by Spring of this year they realized that 2,500 sf was too small, so they relocated into a 6,000-sf space on June 1.

They recently started a presence on TikTok, and for the first little while, they only were selling a few bottles a week. But then the people who had bought those few bottles started posting videos and pictures of themselves with the sauce, and the recipes that they created to use it, and sales have skyrocketed. And the beauty of it is that other people are now handling the marketing and recipe creation/sharing for them, and the audience is growing exponentially. In the past 90 days, views of Elijah’s products in TikTok photos and videos have exceeded 13.4 million, and they reached 12.5 million individuals across all their social media platforms.

The new warehouse happens to have a neighbor that makes/distributes vending machines, and they have worked together to create air-conditioned vending machines that can dispense all of their products—gift boxes as well as individual bottles. The machines are internet capable, so that they can track sales and the need to restock in real time over the web. The machines are in addition to the 1,100 retail outlets currently stocking their products, and of course, sales on Amazon.

The hot sauce industry is now the eighth fastest growing industry in the country and the world, so the future looks extremely bright. While the majority of their sales take place over Amazon, they project that sales over their own platform will exceed the sales on Amazon sometime in 2023. Pretty amazing for a father/son project started in the family kitchen just a few years ago. Nothing like adding some spice to life!

*A recording of the program is available here: <https://vimeo.com/631078053>

The program introduction begins at 16:50 minutes.