

Executive stirs up second career using secret family recipe

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Lonnie Smith never goes anywhere without cheese anymore.

It's his new calling card.

The 52-year-old president of Fort Worth-based Eagle Mountain Landing Inc., maker of Lonzo's Jalapeno Cheese Spread, is happy to hand out samples of his gourmet snack product in lieu of a business card. He's hoping the hot, homemade spread – a carefully crafted concoction resembling pimento cheese but with a kick – will take a bite out of the food industry.

Smith introduced his spicy spread during Chile Pepper Magazine's annual ZestFest in September. He figured he gave away 2,700 taste samples during the three-day event in Fort Worth. He sold 350 containers of the jalapeno dip, and with word-of-mouth advertising from festival-goers, he's beginning to sell even more of the product on a just-launched Web site.

“Somehow I have a belief that this will be a success,” Smith said. “We've never found anybody who didn't like it. Anybody who likes spicy food loves it.”

Although the flavorful cheese spread is new to the market, it's been a favorite in Smith's family for decades. Smith's grandfather, the late L.Q. Orr Jr., founded a food company in 1947 called Orr's Ready Foods based in Odessa. The company made and distributed sandwiches, hamburgers, hot dogs, salads and cheese dips – including this jalapeno dip – to convenience stores, supermarkets and businesses all over West Texas. Orr sold the company in 1979 and retired.

Smith, who grew up in Odessa, began helping in his grandfather's food business when he was about five until he left home at age 20 for a career in Dallas with Womack Machine Supply Co., a distributor of fluid power machinery. For the past 20 years, Smith made the cheese spread and gave it to co-workers as Christmas gifts.

"For all these years everyone's kept telling me I ought to make this stuff and sell it," Smith said. "But I never seriously considered that. I never thought about going into the food industry. Ironically, I wanted no part of the food business when I left my grandfather's shop and went out on my own."

Starting as a shipping/receiving clerk, Smith worked at Womack for 32 years, eventually becoming president and COO. But new ownership and a downsizing strategy at the company in 2008 found Smith without a job in June. He sat down with Greg Bustin, a business consultant for chief executive organization Vistage International, and created a list of all the things he could do. Cheese making was mixed in on the list.

"Greg asked if I had considered making our cheese product commercially," Smith said. "He encouraged me to follow my passion for once instead of following the corporate path. This is now my second career. It's a whole new beginning for me."

With the help of his wife, Debbie Smith, an aerobics instructor, their son-in-law, Garrett Craig, a graphics designer B.J. Lacasse and Shirley Smith who serves as Web master, the new entrepreneur started production of Lonzo's, named in honor of his grandfather and namesake.

As a newbie in the food industry, Smith said he is on a learning curve on how to start and grow a business.

"I've spent just about every day since June learning how to get into the food business, how to become licensed to sell food, finding distributors, finding materials to buy, finding people to hire, getting

permits and licenses and insurance – all those things you have to do as a start-up,” Smith said.

“The thing that’s helping me the most though is 32 years experience I’ve seen in warehousing, customer service, manufacturing, sales and management. I’m not totally starting from scratch,” he said.

Smith said his business model is simple. He rents space at Elixir Kitchen Space, a kitchen incubator in Fort Worth that helps small businesses get started while keeping start-up costs low.

“I don’t own a kitchen. I rent a kitchen,” Smith said. “Everyone I’ve talked to in the food industry told me not to sink all my money in a kitchen at the very start.”

Afraid to hire strangers off the street who might learn his family’s secret recipe, Smith blasted an e-mail to his church. He found three friends there, also all recently laid off, who he knew he could trust.

Lonzo’s Jalapeno Cheese SpreaDip currently is available online and at several local grocery stores, including Roy Pope Grocery. Smith is in negotiations to spread his product to several major nationwide grocery chains.

“We’re not doing this to be rich. We do want to be successful but we want to help people along the way,” Smith said. “It’s a faith-based business. The rewarding part for me is to help those people who are unemployed and, of course, to help provide for my family.”

On the Web: www.lonzoscheese.com