



Our Story

We make Z crackers and are currently in many stores around the country, including Whole Foods.

For more than 35 years we have come up against a series of obstacles but have adapted along the way. Actually, it's really been a slow and sloppy attempt to create a real business. I think that our story might be instructive, if terrifying.

August 1980: I am nearly thirty years old and unhappy in my job as a recording engineer. No money, long hours, and I'm hearing disco songs repeated endlessly, and at full volume. I long to see daylight. My wife, Pam, is earning money as a graphic designer. This allows me the luxury of considering other possibilities. My godfather, Pete, a rotund Sicilian, is opening a pizzeria and wants to know if I would be his partner. I accept. Pam protests. I should have listened. It becomes a two-year incarceration, but I learn a lot about business, and pizza. At one point we are featured on TV making our specialty pies based on Pete's Sicilian recipes. The location is rough, though, and we sell the place for next to nothing. Pete retires to Arizona. We travel on the cheap to Europe and are impressed with a French bread called, "pain de son". We learn that the main ingredient is bran.

March 1982: Pam is laid off and I have nothing going on at all. When the wolf is at your door, you do what you have to. I make a few of Pete's zucchini pizzas in our home oven, adding bran to the dough, like the bread in Paris. Lacking a baking stone I make the pies in tart pans. I take them on the subway to Dean and Deluca on Prince Street in Soho. Joel Dean finds them interesting and when a curious employee asks what they are he says, "savory pies". He orders a dozen for the weekend. I go outside and jump up and down. At this time there are only four fancy food stores in New York. Elated from my fresh success I bring my "savory pies" to Zabar's. The surly manager yells at me, right in front of the customers, saying he sells quiche with LOBSTER in it for less than I was asking. I take my samples back on the bus, tears in my eyes. Balducci's is not interested either.

July 1982: The pies are doing well in Dean and Deluca, and small specialty shops are starting to open up. I make my pitch to them and manage to add a few outlets. Thank goodness that Pam got some work in graphic design. We're calling ourselves "Belly Timber Kitchen" (an obscure term for food). I am constantly explaining the name.

Still making the pies at home. I have discovered that there is a lot of free cardboard separating bottles in a

local beverage shop. I put a pie on them, a little plastic wrap, and then into the trunk of my 1968 Chevelle. I go around our Cobble Hill, Brooklyn neighborhood with a shopping cart for ingredients. By now I've abandoned Pete's recipes and have come up with some pies that are right for the times. Meatless, all natural and very pretty.

October 1984: Our building is sold and we find another apartment around the corner. We don't tell the landlord that we will be running a baking business out of it. We diversify by coming up with some tarts. I am spending a lot of time sculpting fruit into gorgeous creations. On my first delivery I drop the entire order on the shop floor. The owner laughs. By winter I have abandoned the tarts. Too labor intensive.

April 1987: Our landlord tells us to take our baking business and leave. And he makes us replace the oven. Our families help us with the down payment for a house in Ditmas Park. We set up our new kitchen with a small convection oven and use our new basement for storage. We are getting some meetings with chain stores like Fresh Fields and King Kullen. I am still delivering to every store and doing weekend demo's. We hear that people use something called a "distributor" to help expand their business. During the Fancy Food Show I park in front of the Javits center while Pam runs in on a borrowed pass, holding a bag of the pies, and looks up and down the aisles for a distributor. She meets a friendly woman named Jennifer Richards at the Gourmeco booth, who is intrigued.

August 1990: We have adopted two baby girls from Korea. One is constantly asking questions while the other is on my back, making the oven work a little more difficult. Some days we all go on deliveries together. Quite a show. We've got a distributor, finally, but the only way to make it work is to freeze and 'slack out' the pies at the stores. Not ideal. We're tired of explaining "Belly Timber" and incorporate ourselves as "The Savory Pie Company".

February 1993: By now I'm getting nervous that cooking in my home may not be the best way to go. When a store becomes available around the corner I take it. It seems cavernous as we put our few pieces of equipment in a corner. A gas line must be installed from the front to the rear of the store, along with electric and plumbing. This is running into money. I hire my first employee.

September 1995: The pies are just too expensive. The shelf life is too short. I'm taking more and more returns.

I've got to come up with a cheaper recipe that still looks special. When I was a kid my family took a trip to the South where I had my first hushpuppies. Ever since then I have had a love of cornmeal, so I put some of that in the dough. I fold the edges back over the pie, thinking that I had invented the technique. Years later I was surprised to see that the French had been doing it with galettes for some time. But my new "Brooklyn Pizzas" take up some of the slack of the Savory Pies. Now I use pizza boxes for deliveries in my new Previa.

February 1997: Did I say that there were only four fancy food stores in Manhattan when we began? I left out Fairway. And they were the roughest of all. Since the shelves are so crowded, your product has to be good enough for them to remove someone else's. We make dozens of attempts to get in. At one point we asked if we should keep calling. David Grotenstein, the manager, says we should. They like people who don't give up. He is an unusually friendly guy for such a tough business. More typical is one of Fairway's owners. When I have my young daughters with me, this guy brags to them about his new pizza oven. "I'm going to put your daddy out of business", he says.

At this point I'm getting burnt out. Sales are slow. Spoilage is high. I'm jealous of products that have a shelf life. No returns, infrequent deliveries, profits. Pam gets involved. She is the gutsy, energetic and realistic member of the family. She says I shouldn't be so fussy with the recipes, and tosses some spinach over some cheese. "That's a pie". And, so, the Savory Pizzas are born. Fast and cheap, but with an excellent sauce, good dough and a mixture of cheeses. They sell.

June, 1997: We take a brief anniversary trip to Rome. In the Piazza de Fiore we visit a famous pizza bakery. They have very large, rectangular pies in red or white. The white is red onion and rosemary. They are really a kind of foccacia. We take note.

May 1999: The business is now supporting three employees, two of whom I have sponsored for citizenship. Unfortunately I didn't know that I couldn't employ them until their working permits come through. That would take five years. I am brought down to the INS and fined \$1400. Meanwhile, when I'm not around, they fight. When I speak to each one privately, the others are always to blame. I pick one and fire him. It takes two hours because he nearly talks me out of it. But, thankfully, I make the right choice and there is harmony in the bakery, now equipped with a wrapping machine, a dough roller, and a third oven. But now the ovens aren't working so well. Three experts tell me the gas line we installed needs to be replaced with a bigger one. We close down during the process. The gas company

breaks up the street to supply more gas to the store. The ovens still don't work. I am feeling very light headed and long for the days back in our home kitchen. Then it is discovered that there is a problem within the new oven. The old gas line would have been fine.

December 2000: Now I'm getting very burnt out. Distributors have come and gone. I can't seem to make the pies last more than a week, and I'm not willing to take the chance to create a frozen pizza. That would put me in an aisle full of competitors when I've developed relationships with cheese departments as a fresh pizza that works well in their refrigerated cases. I visit various labs to see if they can help with mold issues. Now I've got petrie dishes all over the bakery. Nothing helps. Some people think that the path they are on is an inevitable one, while others have no problem taking a detour. "We're going to make crackers", says Pam. And, despite my skepticism, we begin experimenting with the various pizza doughs we have come up with over the years. The one with the corn meal and bran actually makes a nice cracker. And the red onion and rosemary flavor we tasted in Rome makes a tasty topping. So now we have the influences of Paris, the American South and Rome all in one cracker.

July 2001: Fancy Food Show, New York. We are a finalist for Best Cracker. We tell everyone we can. The crackers sell. And just as important, they last. Sweet. A distributor is willing to give us another try. But they want exclusivity. We accept.

September 11, 2001: I am about to leave for a delivery to Amish Market near the World Trade Center. Pam calls from work to tell me to stay home. Amish Market is destroyed. All of the employees get out safely.

September 12, 2001: I've got fresh pies from the day before, and I need the money, so I decide to go on deliveries despite the pandemonium. I find a spot at 14th Street and take the pies downtown by luggage cart. Storeowners are very surprised and grateful to see me.

July 2002: We hire Linda Luke as our broker. She becomes our fairy godmother, is indispensable and leads us through rapids that lesser people couldn't navigate. Our exclusive distributor deal has become a strangle hold. They might drop us if we use another one. It's a very awkward moment. We decide to move forward, come what may.

August 14, 2003: I am doing a demo at Garden of Eden on 14th Street when the lights go out. A blackout that affects the whole state. The owners bring perishable food out to the sidewalk to sell. I give away pies to eager pedestrians. Dozens are gone in seconds.

June 2007: Things are really improving. We start to have what I call “good problems”. We can’t fill the cracker orders and the Savory Pizza orders at the same time. We make a big decision and stop all pizza making. We are now a shelf stable company. But the crackers are breaking the plastic bags. We change plastics. They still break. We find a clear, strong box. Pam designs a label for any display option.

May 2008: We are starting to outgrow our store. Because of the small door we are carrying the cases out to trucks by hand. Drivers are not happy with the delay or the fact that they must build a pallet while double parked on Beverley Road. And our distributors are tired of waiting for product. We look at other locations, but are nervous about the large investment. Could we actually get someone else to do the baking?

September 2009: We have decided to use a co-packer to make the crackers. They can handle much more than we can, but it is expensive. And they send out an order with spoiled olive oil. We have to look elsewhere.

July 2009: We’re outdoors at a wedding in Saratoga Springs. I’m hot and miserable in my suit. We make small talk with some distant cousins. These people are from the moneyed, sophisticated, Connecticut branch of the family. They condescend to speak to us. I mention the crackers and their faces light up. “We LOVE those crackers! You make them?”
We have arrived.

Sept 2010: We have a new co packer out in Long Island City. It is a hell of a transition but they do a great job. We have re-branded the package. My former employees, American citizens now, have taken over the store lease and are running a successful Mexican deli. Pam and I are spending more time traveling around to shows and potential distributors. And for the first time in 30 years I feel like everything is in place.

April 2016: I will be 65 in July. How long can we do this? In order to entice a possible buyer we know we have to grow. We have taken on an advisor, a salesperson and a social media expert. We are taking a business course. We have gone Non GMO, tamper proof, changed the crackers’ shape, struggled with Quickbooks on line, placed ads, and attended trade shows, We are becoming more like the business model we resisted, but see the necessity. Our category has become very competitive. Specialty departments are overloaded with artisan crackers. But we do have an enthusiastic following. We get love letters telling us how terrific our crackers are. We have been praised

by the likes of Bobby Flay and Oprah. We put more in the box than others and are cheaper ounce for ounce. We keep the overhead low by working from home. Which is very nice. We can decide to get up and go for a walk if we feel like it. We can take the time to visit our granddaughter in Tribeca in the middle of the week. It feels like semi-retirement, but we are not there yet. One of my homemade mottos is, “The only thing worse than working for yourself, is working for someone else.” If I step back from the business and take a look, there really isn’t much that I would change. It’s not as if I sacrificed another career. I spent ten years working on a musical about the pizzeria while we were working in the business. I got some interest, but no takers. I did get close enough to that field to realize that it would be even crazier than the food business.
So keep posted. It ain’t over yet.

December, 2018: The Holidays are coming around. And, among other things, it’s a time for reflection. There is plenty to look back on. As far as the business goes, I’m getting a feeling one could call “confidence.” Is it possible that we can have people coming to us instead of our knocking on doors all of the time? Exciting!
We have refined the look of the crackers’ package by changing the color palette and finding a better tub. We’ve added a new flavor (Everything Good). Our Long Island City co-packers needed more space but were very helpful in settling us into new surroundings. This fresh facility has been welcoming and they are patient with us as we institute all these changes. Another piece of luck we had was finding our new (and only) sales manager, Elena Balletta. She is skilled and also full of youthful energy and enthusiasm.
Pam is still wearing many hats, including graphic design, accounting, and everything else that a business owner should do. Me, I’m pretending to be semi-retired. Well, close enough. I still put my two cents in if someone needs the wisdom of an over the hill hippie. I am proud of what I’ve started. Z Crackers are sold in stores nationwide. But there’s still plenty of territory to conquer.

So. Is anybody interested in a musical play about a pizzeria?

Keith Pollack, co-owner.

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